

LIGHT AND DARK:

A DELTARUNE CHAPTER 1 FICZINE



A Movie Marathon

aiviloti

There was a sharp rap on the door.

Toriel's gaze followed the direction of the noise, wondering who it could possibly be at this hour. There were muffled voices behind the door, one of them slightly raised than the others. Although Toriel couldn't identify who the voices belonged to, nor what they were talking about, but there was an impatient edge to them. "Hold on a minute, I'm coming," she called out, her hands deftly undoing the apron strings before she hustled over to answer the door.

A swirl of pink entered her sight.

Before her was a familiar face, and two less familiar ones. Putting a voice as cheery as she could muster, she chirped, "hello there, Susie, and uh..." Toriel trailed off helplessly, gesturing to the other two behind Susie until one of them helpfully supplied, "Ralsei and Lancer!"

"Right, Ralsei and Lancer," Toriel nodded, making a mental note to remember their names.

"What can I do for you kids today?"

Susie grinned, much to the surprise of Toriel, and slowly said "We're here for Kris."

At this, alarms began to blare in Toriel's head as she went through a mental tally of all possible things her child could have done to get on the bad side of the bully of town. "Oh, Kris? They're upstairs." She hoped no one noticed how her voice had suddenly gone an octave higher. She returned Susie's wide grin, "Would you like me to get them for you?"

"That would be great, thanks ma'am," Susie said, the grin unsettling Toriel further.

Seeing how Toriel immediately paled further at Susie's words, Ralsei hurriedly began to assure her. "Don't worry, ma'am. Susie won't hurt Kris because she's a changed fellow now." Nudging Susie, who repeatedly nodded, "Aren't you?"

At that moment, there was a shuffle from behind Toriel. Everyone looked to reveal Kris, who was looking like their usual composed self. They approached them, and mumbled to Toriel, saying, "I told you some friends were coming to watch a movie today, didn't I?"

"It must have slipped my mind, my dear." Toriel gave a scratch of her head, internally cursing old age and her memory. "Now hurry along, my young ones. Enjoy the movie." She showed them inside, and closed the door shut behind her.

The gang sprang into the house, then upstairs, clearly more talkative now that the quartet was completed. Ralsei and Susie could be seen to be arguing, with phrases like "upsetting their mum" and "unkind" somehow finding their way into the conversation. Meanwhile,

Lancer tugged at Kris's arm, eagerly talking to them about something Toriel couldn't really understand, with many hand gestures accompanying his speech.

Ah, so this funny batch, this unlikely trio were the people who kris was willing to claim as friends? How wonderful! Toriel beamed at the thought as she sank in the armchair after a long day, finally able to get some long deserved rest. But yet, she soon caught her thoughts wandering and herself wondering what kind of pie the kids liked.

"This is why we never watch movies together," Ralsei declared after a lot of choosing between movies. "We simply don't watch the same movies, so it wouldn't be fair at all to some of us if we only choose a few among them."

They all crowded into Kris's room for movie night, despite the evident lack of a TV or any device that could serve a television's purpose, which was why Kris lugged a short table in that could hold a laptop. They sprawled on the floor.

Susie, who was impatiently tapping her fingers against the table, asked, "Why can't we just watch one or more of everyone's choices then? Then no one has to get upset and we get to watch more movies in one go." She took a quick glance at the time displayed on her phone, then added, "it's not like we don't have the time."

Lancer's eyes lit up as he clasped his hands together, rubbing them against each other in glee. "Does that mean you will all watch 'Spaghetti in Pyjamas' with me?"

Startled, Ralsei said, "Well, I suppose so." He mused, then continued saying, "Although, you must admit it's a show that doesn't have much-"

As to what Ralsei thought of Spaghetti in Pyjamas, no one would ever find out as he was interrupted by a cheer from Lancer, followed by Susie who hushed him, urging for him to sit down. She pat the empty spot next to her, indicating that it was his spot. Meanwhile, Kris managed to fix up the laptop, and huddled among the rest of the gang in the beanbags that used to be Asriel's.

Watching movies together was truly wild.

The four of them had varied tastes, some that even clashed, which explained Lancer covering his eyes for more than half of "The Conjuring", Susie's choice. She on the other hand, had her eyes practically glued to the screen, happily exclaiming how well made the movie was. The movie made Ralsei very anxious as he was worried for Lancer, who may have been shivering from fear, but still refused to admit it scared him at all.

The most surprised one of them all was probably Toriel, as she definitely did not expect her intended surprise - a baked pie - to earn herself many high pitched screams.

"Apple pie? Or would the kids enjoy butterscotch pie more?" Toriel asked herself the moment she heard the door shut. It was not everyday that your emo-ish child who chose to hide themselves away from everyone else suddenly invite a grand total of 3 friends over, surely it was an occasion worth celebrating with pie?

Toriel idly checked the counters, realising that her dilemma was all for nothing as there she did not have the required ingredients for an apple pie, anyway. Humming a tune, her skilled hands adeptly mixing the ingredients up, with a batter that a butterscotch pie required whipped up in no time.

The oven made a loud sound of "Ding!", and it was ready for the kids.

"This pie would not be as good as it is right now later when it has cooled down, so I should probably cut a few slices for Kris and their friends while the pie is hot," she thought to herself, her hands already reaching for a knife.

With some pie and utensils in hand, off she happily marched to Kris's room, but the moment she turned the doorknob, she was greeted with a loud scream. Her hold on the tray that held the pie loosened, and everything was set into slow motion as several pair of eyes watched in horror as the tray went into freefall.

To everyone's surprise, the motion stopped.

Ralsei caught the tray, along with all the pieces of pie. Toriel let out her breath that she had not realised she had been holding until now. Applause rang from the other room, as Susie and Lancer began to cheer at Ralsei, who himself looked every bit as surprised as the rest.

"Thank you, my dear," Toriel said, reaching for the tray from him, not fully recovered from the shock.

"I ... I don't really know how I did it, to be honest," Ralsei replied, a faint blush spreading across his face. "I don't usually have reflexes that good."

"Who cares? That was so cool!" Lancer said, the admiration gleaming in his eyes. Susie didn't say a word, but her lips were shaped like an 'O'.

Kris was the only one who was shaken by the turn of events, nonchalantly getting up from their seat. In a few steps, they were at Toriel's side. They began to put the miraculously undamaged pie onto the plates and passed them to his friends. Once they made sure everyone had one, they helped themselves to the last piece on the tray, then sat back down in their seat like nothing happened. They gave Toriel a slight wave as a thanking gesture, then began eating.

"I guess not everyone is surprised at my sudden agility then, huh?" Ralsei blurted out after a moment of silence.

The words cleared the originally tense atmosphere, as everyone laughed. Toriel smiled and exited the room, leaving the kids to whatever they were doing, not forgetting to call out, "Stop watching horror movies if you kids can't take it, alright?"

"Can we watch something happier now?" Lancer groaned after the second 'Halloween' movie.

"This was supposed to be a joyful occasion." He put his head into his hands.

Kris pondered for a moment, and began to type into the search bar. When the result came out, they turned the computer screen to face the rest of them. "This is a show I loved as a kid, it's pretty decent and there's no serious themes involved."

"Sounds good to me," Ralsei nodded approvingly. "Is everyone good with this?"

"That looks interesting," Lancer said, thankful for the change, meanwhile Susie shrugged. "Why not? I watched a lot of that as a kid too."

Kris turned the computer back to set up the movie, while Ralsei teased Lancer gently. "It's pretty contrasting to see you so against watching these chaotic movies when you literally tried to run me and Kris over just some time back. "

"I'm a changed fellow, you can trust me," Lancer laughed good-naturedly.

An hour later, Toriel went back to check on the kids, as well as collect the plates from earlier. She knocked on the door this time, not wanting a fiasco like just now. When she received no reply after several knocks, she turned the doorknob and let herself in, to see the four friends all huddled together, fast asleep on the beanbags.

She felt her lips curving into a smile, not being able to remember when was the last time she saw Kris being around so many friends, and actually doing something together. The computer was still on, playing a show Toriel remember Kris loving as a kid.

Turning off the computer and collecting the plates, she left the room quietly, not wanting to disrupt the serenity.

Lesser is More

bunnikkila

A day and a half.

The thought came to Rouxls Kaard as he went over the plans for his next, *greatest* trap, and once it was there it wouldn't leave, niggling at the back of his mind like a tripped switch.

The Younge Lord had not pestered him for a day and a half.

All to the good, really - the little worm's pestering was but a thorn in his brilliant side, a detriment to the creation of his beautiful puzzles, an irritant unworthy of--

--of the thorough distraction that his absence created.

Well. Nothing for it but to investigate.

Even if Lancer was not a Duke Of Puzzles' responsibility, the path to his quarters was so often blessed by Rouxls' footsteps that he could have walked it blindfolded. (Now there was a puzzle idea. Thou musteth proceed... deprivedst of thine owne eyes!) The castle was relatively small, and while Lancer's room was... oddly far from his father's chambers, the distance was short for one with the stamina of Rouxls Kaard. So it was a matter of moments before he was standing before the royal bedroom door.

It was ajar, and silent within. Lancer likely wasn't even there, was most likely out pestering that other prince, the shadowy little fluffworm.

That was a reasonable... eh... reason for him to be out!

But... best to be sure. Rouxls nudged the door lightly, and flinched at the loud creak the hinges produced; really, who was responsible for maintaining these things?

Lancer was there after all, sitting on the edge of his bed (which was, as usual, largely occupied by his bike); he looked up sharply, his pudgy little shoulders tensing. When he saw it was Rouxls some of the tension dropped, replaced by an odd expression somewhere between disappointment and relief. Rouxls hesitated - even his brilliant mind was at a loss as to how to deal with such a reception - and he was about to simply leave when Lancer spoke up.

"Oh. Hey Lesser Dad."

Rouxls scowled, straightening his posture and flipping his hair back over his shoulder with a derisive snort. Lesser indeed!

Dad indeed! He was no one's father!

Still, Lancer was watching him, some sort of expectation painting his posture and features. Smiling, but still with a certain odd tension in him. Rouxls snorted again, more a resigned puff this time, and folded his arms as he addressed the boy.

"And an equivalentst greeting to thee, O Prince of Worms!"

Lancer giggled quietly at the address, knees tucking up into his chest; he never was properly impressed or cowed by Rouxls. Infuriating!

Still, the way the tension started to seep out of him was... gratifying.

"Whatcha need?" Lancer asked after a moment. His tone was flippant but still thrumming with tension, and Rouxls hesitated as he tried to see the best path forward. The interactions of the Spade Royals was a puzzle even he, the great Duke Of Puzzles, had difficulty navigating; while he had a niggling thought that Lancer's current funk had something to do with the Spade King's attitudes toward him, there was truly no way of knowing without quite a lot of awkward questioning that Lancer would no doubt deny.

"Need?" Rouxls repeated after a moment, pushing his voice to its proper haughtiness. "I needeth not from thou!"

He turned to walk out, flipping his hair dramatically over his shoulder.

Not quickly enough to miss how Lancer's face fell at the proclamation.

Rouxls paused, hand resting lightly on the door jamb; he could hear Lancer shift behind him, a soft sigh escaping the prince. He wavered, a moment of indecision capturing him there with one foot in the hall.

Then he sighed as well, turning from the door to approach Lancer; the prince looked away, the sliver of his face visible beneath his hood creased in a defiant scowl, and Rouxls sighed again and softened his tone.

"Wouldst thou carest to showeth me thine MP3s?"

Lancer lit up, looking up into Rouxls' face as if to confirm he meant it; when Rouxls didn't move or give a dissembling comment the prince scooted eagerly aside, patting the mattress beside him. Rouxls hesitated - when was the last time those sheets had been washed? - but when Lancer's face started to fall again he sighed a third time and gingerly lowered himself onto the mattress.

All right. This wasn't so bad. Lancer scooted close to him, a round little presence all but nestled into his side like a baby bird under its mother's wing (or its Lesser Dad's wing, as the case may be), and Rouxls realized he was smiling as he carefully took the earbud Lancer offered up.

The cacophony was immediate and indescribable, an incongruous mishmash of sounds that no sane musician would ever think to put together and that had the Duke of Puzzles

wondering if the prince had ever even heard music. Rouxls froze, shoulders drawing up so tight that a tense ache immediately sprang up in the center of his back. Still, he kept his face straight (a most admirable effort, if he did say so himself), enduring the odd hodgepodge of sound, the random shifts in volume, the headache he could already feel forming in that ever-sensitive spot between his eyebrows.

Enduring it so well, in fact, that when it ended he held his position for several breaths, hardly registering that the onslaught had ended and that he was, for the moment, free - at least until Lancer spoke up.

"Well?"

Rouxls jumped slightly at the young prince's voice, blinking as his shoulders slowly lowered from their uptight position. He reached up to slowly remove the earbud, looking at it as one might regard a venomous snake and wondering what in all the world he was meant to say to Lancer.

"That--er." He looked down at Lancer's eager face, unconsciously leaning back as the prince leaned in closer to him. "That was... ah... was... I haveth not... experienced such...."

"Did you like it?"

Lancer's voice was a bright, tremulous chirp. Rouxls fidgeted with the cuffs of his coat, clearing his throat.

"It's... I findest it... most... intriguing, young prince."

Under even that faint praise, Lancer glowed; Rouxls softened as he gazed at the boy, really seeing how he grasped at the faintest spark of approval, and he reached out to lay a hand on the prince's shoulder. It was impossible to miss how Lancer tensed under the touch, and tensed further when Rouxls frowned at the response.

Strange how a boy so eager to sidle up to Rouxls Kaard of all people would be so reticent when someone else initiated the contact. It wasn't a thread he was willing to pursue just yet. Besides: Lancer was leaning into the touch, that absurd smile spreading across his chubby face again, and Rouxls smiled tentatively back.

"You think it was good?"

"Ah." Well there was a question. Surely it wouldn't do to lie to the fledgeling sovereign! And yet, the awfulness of the MP3 was such that Rouxls didn't quite feel secure in exposing Lancer to the depths of his distaste!

Not, at least, when Lancer still seemed so brittle.

"I believest... that thou hast much potential," he said at last. A truth that Lancer could take as he would.

"You do?" Lancer's tone was bright and thoughtful at once, the prince leaning closer to Rouxls; irritating that the boy always seemed so eager to share his personal space, but Rouxls couldn't deny the relief of seeing more tension leaving him.

"Tsk. Th'art meaningst to accuseth me of lies, prince?"

Rouxls leaned back, arms folding as he tipped his head back to gaze haughtily down at Lancer. Once again the boy had the gall - the unrelenting temerity! - to laugh at this, peering up at Rouxls with a beaming smile.

"No. You always say what you mean. Even when you say it all twisty."

"Do I," Rouxls said absently. Well... no matter, the Prince seemed to catch his meanings whatever he said, even if he said it... what? "Twisty?" he echoed. "My liege! Tis buteth the finestst of noble speech, and one thou'st would doeth well to learn for thine own wormy future!"

Lancer tilted his head, the set of his mouth thoughtful.

"Okayest," he said at last, and then giggled again. "Was that, um... goodeth?"

Rouxls raised a brow, but allowed the haughtiness of his features to relax.

"Only the finest attemptsest, as expected."

That got another giggle, as he should have well expected. Lancer seemed very much himself now, the tension gone to make way for his usual absurdly relaxed demeanor and the hesitation in his voice swallowed by his usual devil-may-care cheerfulness. Rouxls smiled, getting to his feet and bowing slightly.

"Now - perhaps we shouldst visiteth yon kitchen. Hast thou emergeth'd recently?"

"Nopel!" Lancer said brightly, hopping from the bed to head toward the door. "And I'm starved!"

Halfway out he paused, shuffling from foot to foot as Rouxls watched. Then he scurried back, taking the Duke of Puzzles by the hand.

"You're coming too... right?"

Rouxls blinked, instinctively attempting to pull away from Lancer's grasp - but another look at the prince's hopeful, shining face stilled him and he sighed fondly, curling his slender digits around the boy's chubby paw.

"Yes, O worme - I cometh."

Lancer glowed, and Rouxls allowed himself to feel gratified - just the tiniest bit! - as they headed down the stone corridors together.

Lesser, it would seem, was really not so bad.

Puzzled Parenting

flyhinata

"So if 't be true thee wanteth to solve the puzzle, thee has't to maketh a big picture from all of these small, cutteth up pictures."

"Well who was stupid enough to cut up the picture in the first place?!"

"I don't know, and I don't very much care. The origineth of thy cruel and difficult "jigsaw puzzles" remaineth a mystery. Now Lancer, thee wilt beest completing thy first puzzle today. You hath said thee wanted super, ultra, mega difficulty, so I present thee not a 1 piece puzzle, not a 2, or a 3 piece puzzle. I present to thee an 8 piece puzzle!"

Rouxls Kaard was the Duke of Puzzles, and it was his responsibility to teach the young Prince Lancer how to put a jigsaw puzzle together.

However, Rouxls Kaard himself wasn't the most expert of puzzle masters, and as much as he proclaimed it, it wasn't exactly true. The King of the Spades was largely an inattentive father, and despite Lancer calling Rouxls "Lesser Dad," he was often the primary caretaker of the young prince. The puzzlemaster practically raised him, and Lancer was secretly grateful to have a father figure around when his own father was not.

He was too young to really understand the truth behind why his father was absent, or even why Rouxls stepped up to the plate as his Lesser Dad. All that mattered was that Rouxls played hide and seek and Lightners vs. Darkners every morning and every evening with him. Rouxls made his food less unappetizing and read him bedtime stories. And best of all, Rouxls taught him about puzzles, one of his favorite past times.

Just like now.

At least an hour had passed now, with Lancer carefully putting together 2 of the 8 pieces of the puzzle. Rouxls was already thoroughly impressed at his speed. It had taken him a whole day to figure out 2 pieces once!

"Thy speedeth is v'ry impressive. P'rhaps thee've been practicing in thy free timeth, young sire?"

"No way! I don't practice puzzles in my free time! In my free time, I'm doing all kinds of important other things! Like not practicing puzzles!"

There were quite a few things the young prince probably could've been doing that would've made his father happier. It wasn't that Lancer was an unsuitable prince, but he was simply just a young boy that had plenty of youth left to live out before taking on boring responsibilities like "overseeing the dungeon" and "filing taxes."

Rouxls on the other hand, knew that the young prince was expected to live up to his father's expectations. The old king hadn't always been like this. There was a side of him that knew the light, but that king was long in the past now. It was a puzzle he hadn't yet solved. Though Rouxls was the Duke of Puzzles, the King was a labyrinth of emotions and motivations he couldn't solve.

And Lancer, well...he was too young to see the darkness that had overtaken the king's heart. "Rouxls, I think I did it!"

"Hm? Art thee sure thee did finish completely?"

Rouxls leaned over and looked at the puzzle, and surprisingly it was complete. He was completely shocked. Careful fingers moved the puzzle closer, and he nodded in approval.

"Very well done, Lancer. Tis almost as if 't be true thee has't been practicing...?" Rouxls looked at Lancer suspiciously, who appeared to be shuffling with his MP3 player.

"No? Wh-why would I do something as lame as that? I only have time for my sick beats..."

However, despite his claim of only having time for "sick beats," Lancer was suspiciously quiet. And he was also clutching onto his bag too tightly not to be suspicious.

"What's in the bageth, young sire?"

"What bag? I don't see any bag."

"The bageth thou art holding onto for deareth life."

"Pffff...you're crazy lesser dad. Maybe you need to get your eyesockets checked out." In the process of trying to move the bag away, a series of contents fell out of the bag and onto the floor.

"Young sire."

Lancer quickly threw his tiny body over the hundreds of puzzle pieces that spilled onto the floor. They were mixed and matched, none of them quite looking like they were from the same puzzle.

"It's not what it looks like!"

"Has't thee really been doing puzzles with someone besides me?!"

"N-no!"

"Am I nay longeth'r FANCIFUL enough to doeth puzzles with?"

"It's..it's not that! I just..." Lancer paused, sniffing before he looked up at Rouxls.

"I-I wanted to impress you!"

Rouxls was shocked at that. Lancer? Wanting to impress...him? He was called the Lesser Dad for a reason, and despite Lancer always sticking by his side, he was never quite sure what the younger really thought about him. They were both quite dishonest about their feelings with one another. Rouxls never wanted to show how much fondness had grown for the boy and Lancer refused to show that he thought anything but the sick beats on his mp3 player were cool.

But, Lancer had to admit, Rouxls was a little cool. For a Lesser Dad.

"You shant need to impresseth me, Lancer." Rouxls patted the head of the young boy, his expression softeneing.

"Well...well I wasn't! That was just a joke!"

"Mhm. Very well then. Demonstrate to thine Lesser Dad your....non-practiced puzzling skills."

"Heck yeah, I've been waiting forever to do a 10 piece!"

Rouxls and Lancer spent the day working their way through a few 10 piece puzzles, a 20 piece, and the rest of their week was spent on the big 100 piece puzzle. There was a rumor that there was a legendary 1000 piece, but Lancer couldn't even imagine that many pieces in one room!

Thankfully Lancer was able to show Rouxls how to more efficiently complete the puzzles. Lancer wasn't quite sure why Rouxls felt the need to recite a Shakespearean monologue to each individual piece, but he swore that it was doing wonders to help him solve them.

Lancer wasn't so sure about that.

Though Rouxls was Lancer's lesser dad, he never felt like less of a dad to him. In fact, Rouxls was a Morer Dad. But perhaps the reason he was called Lesser Dad was that he was less like the dad that Lancer already knew.

However, neither of them were going to talk about that now.

"Hey Lesser Dad?"

"What troubles thou, Lesser Son?" Rouxls looked at Lancer teasingly, arranging the jars on the shelf as Lancer sat on the floor of the Hip Shop.

"When I become king...well...if I become king...are you gonna still...you know...be my Lesser Dad?"

"Wherefore wouldn't I? Haven't I stayed by thee all this timeth?"

"Well it's just...a lot of my dad's old friends left him when he became king so...I didn't want you to disappear too."

Rouxls didn't have the heart to tell the young boy that those people probably didn't disappear willingly, and disappear was already probably a light term for what the king had done to them.

"I'm not going anywh're." Rouxls walked over and patted Lancer's head. "I'll stayeth by thy side as longeth as thee wisheth me to beest, young sire."

"Promise?"

"I maketh not promises, because if something befalls me, I wanteth not to breaketh thine promise. But f'r as longeth as I am living and able, I shall doth mine best to fulfill thy requesteth. Deal?"

"Deal!"

And thus a deal was made and Lancer dove into the large pile of puzzle pieces that filled the hole in the center of the room. It was like a ball pit, except much more uncomfortable and a LOT less fun to jump face first into. Lancer spit a few puzzle pieces at Rouxls, who stared back, unimpressed.

"Jump in the Puzzle Pit with me!" he climbed out, shaking off the puzzle pieces that clung to him like water on a wet dog.

"Absolutely not! Doth thou eyes believe me to be a child?!"

"Come on Rouxls! It'll be fun!"

"I am a duke young sire. I do not swimeth in...Puzzle Pits."

"Well right now, you're my Lesser Dad. And Lesser Dads swim in the Puzzle Pit."

There was a beat of silence, and Rouxls looked at the door. There shouldn't be much business today, right? Walking over in defeat, he locked up the shop and stared at the face of the overly eager spade.

"Thou may jumpeth with me into thine Puzzle Pit. Onceth."

"Yeehaw!"

The Corridor

kibasnipr

Missing chalk was a conundrum that never needed solving in Alphys' classroom. Alphys knew Susie frequently stole her chalk, but she could never gather any willpower to discipline her. Instead, she meandered around the issue and requested for anyone else to fetch her a new box. Even if Susie was deliberately fiddling with a stick of chalk in her seat, Alphys overlooked her and asked again if anyone would volunteer.

Despite her stealing Alphys' chalk, Noelle didn't think Susie was so bad. Even if Susie agitated Alphys, Noelle's intuition told her Susie had more depth than she presented. There was something beyond that bullying persona she fronted that made Noelle curious. The way Susie shielded herself from anyone prying too closely to her thoughts filled Noelle's afternoons with contemplative theories about her mysteriously cool classmate.

Those thoughts preoccupied Noelle as she ambled down the hall to the supply closet. She had been asked by Alphys to get more chalk after Susie was caught dumping an entire packet of it into her pocket. Noelle had agreed, but as she left, she peered over to Susie and watched her examine the chinks. Blue, pink, and white powder coated her bony claws. Susie's pleasant grin stretching into her cheeks stayed with Noelle's thoughts and heightened her curiosity.

As her fingers curled around the closet door knob, Noelle wondered why Susie frequently stole Alphys' chalk. Perhaps she liked drawing. There were colorful pictures drawn by some of the younger students outside of school on the pavement and near the parking lot. Maybe Susie was drawing them when no one was looking. Imagining Susie as the one drawing those sketchy hydrangeas and daffodils found in front of school made her heart skip a beat and cheeks flush with scarlet.

Her thoughts, however, were quickly dashed. Something shuffled inside the closet, sounding similar to fluttering papers. From the fluorescent light provided by the hall, she noticed several papers lining the floor. She tilted her head, wondering if a sheet of computer paper had slipped out of its packaging when she opened the door and made the odd sound.

She trekked over the papers and stretched her arm out, expecting to reach the wall. She waved her hand but didn't connect with anything. She told herself the light switch must have been a little farther down and continued moving into the closet until her heels no longer clacked against the paper.

Frustration seized her. Noelle dragged her hands in the air and kept moving in what she felt were circles, but the light switch and walls eluded her. Surrounding her was stale air and nothingness. She continued stretching her arms far out for the wall, but all she felt between her splayed fingers was the wind she created from flapping her hands. It was as if she was stuck in a void, endless and painted black.

Noelle swallowed. She hadn't expected the supply closet to be so large. She felt like leaving, but she shook her head. There had to be a light switch somewhere in the closet. It wasn't like she was walking into a tunnel, but as she crept further down, she found herself gnawing on her lower lip.

Maybe I should've asked someone to come with me-oh, no! No way. That's really babyish, she thought, and she clapped her hands to her cheeks. Keep it together, Noelle! It's just a supply closet. There's nothing really weird about a freakishly long and wall-less supply closet!

Huffing, Noelle slouched. Irritation swept through her as she narrowed her eyes on what she hoped was a regular floor. Another teacher would probably have been willing to lend her some chalk. Toriel usually had an extra pack of chalk on paw, and she was normally a friendly, generous monster if the subject was about anything besides her ex. Rubbing her forearms, Noelle pivoted and faced the door, her mind set on asking Toriel.

All of a sudden as she turned, the light perished. The door slammed shut with an echoing boom. Somehow, even though she was far from the door, it had shut on Noelle and trapped her in darkness.

She uttered a short shriek and clapped her hands over her mouth. Hot embarrassment burned in her belly, and she hoped no one above her heard such an awfully strident screech. Someone must've seen the open door and shut it without checking inside. If they knew she was inside, then they would've left it open. Her rational reasoning comforted her as she caught her breath and pressed her hand over her heart, shaking her head for uttering such a high-pitched wail.

With the clacking of her flats echoing on what she hoped was the tiled floor, Noelle realized she wasn't reaching the exit that she had just seen close. She extended her arm and found it sinking into the darkness. She whipped her head in every direction and furrowed her brow, creeping horror sinking into her brain. Goosebumps ran along her arms and spine as she trekked in what she thought was the right way.

There's only one way out of a room with one door! Just one! Her panicked thoughts stewed in her mind, rolling around as if stirred with a wooden ladle in a hot pot. It's just an overly big supply closet without any lights or exit in sight, Noelle! Just walk back the way you came!

Her chest constricted as if her ribcage squeezed her heart and slowed her breathing. She fiddled with the hem of her wool sweater. Closing her eyes, Noelle counted to ten, practicing what her father had taught her to do in times of stress. She remembered counting to calm down when Kris scared the wits out of her with their ketchup prank, the memory only making her chew on the insides of her mouth. Having creeping memories pinch the back of her brain was certainly not what she needed while confined in a seemingly neverending supply closet without any source of light.

She wasn't sure which direction was the way she entered as she kept walking. There was only stretching darkness surrounding every corner of the supply closet, which she wasn't

even sure was the same place anymore. Even when she thought she reached the door, it wasn't there almost as if it had vanished into thin air. Noelle drew in quick breaths, her arms crossing over her chest as she ducked her head. She strained her ears in hopes of hearing students outside, but no sound emerged except for her own panicked breathing. It was as if she was trapped in some sort of parallel dimension, disconnected from anyone she once knew.

All this panicking for some stupid chalk!

Noelle threw her arms up, a grunt of exasperation blasting past her teeth. "Is there any light in here? Come on!"

"Um, I'm sorry, but I don't think there's a light switch in this corridor."

Noelle's lips clamped shut as the unfamiliar voice shot between her ears. She froze, feeling encased in a block of ice, a sculpture of terror for no one except the mysterious phantom hidden in the supply closet. Trembling, Noelle craned her head over her shoulder. Her mouth formed imperceptible words as she scanned the darkness, but instead of a scream dashing over her tongue, she gawked at the strange monster standing behind her.

How did I not notice him?

What she assumed was a friendly smile adorned his round face. From what Noelle could make out, the figure wore a loose cape or cloak around his body. Perhaps something like a pointy hat topped his head, but she couldn't exactly tell. Shades of green and pink colored his body, muted without any light. Noelle squinted to try to make out more of his figure, but her eyes refused to register anything else.

"Oh! Uh, hello!" He shifted, and Noelle felt fingers graze against her sweater. "I'm sorry to bother you, Lightner, but you seemed a bit distressed."

"D-distressed?' 'Lightner?' What?" Noelle breathed out a sigh, and she raised her hand. She slid it against the warm palm of the hidden monster. Soft fur brushed against her fingers, but his odd coolness made her shiver.

He chuckled, withdrawing his hand. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't really explain that well." He bounced in place. "I just really wanted to get a glance of the Lightners' world to prepare myself for what's going to come soon! To think I'd be able to meet one, too!" He scratched his neck and chuckled. "I'm very sorry, Lightner. I got so nervous when you started turning around that I just shut the door on you. That wasn't very thoughtful of me at all."

"Oookay." Noelle tilted her head, her blonde hair covering her neck. "Am I being pranked? Did Berdly put you up to one of his pranks?"

"O-oh, no! Not at all. I, well, I don't know who that is." He rapidly shook his head, his hat and what appeared to be a scarf around his neck wobbling. "Um, maybe I should introduce myself!" He gasped, covering his snout and lowering his voice. "Oh, um, but what if I

shouldn't? What if that ruins everything?" Another harsh gasp pierced the air between them. "But what if she's one of the-?"

"Hey! Can I have some answers please?" Noelle shouted, her hands balling into fists, and he yelped, leaping a foot into the air. A fleeting feeling of guilt flicked her heart when he whimpered. "So, who are you? I don't recognize your voice, and you definitely don't sound like one of my classmates."

If she was hesitant before, then her wariness was kicked up a notch when he bowed his head. He thumbed the rim of his hat, and Noelle brushed her hair back, threading her fingers through her thick curls. Taking a step behind her, Noelle was about to run when he cleared his throat.

"I'm Ralsei," he chirped, smiling, "and what's your name?"

Relief patted her on the back. She uttered a quiet sigh and said, "I'm Noelle Holiday. It's nice to meet you, Ralsei, I think."

Ralsei laughed. "I would hope so! It's not every day I get to meet a Lightner."

"There's that word again." She chuckled, her tone laced with uncertainty.

He leaned forward, his eyes sparkling in the darkness like tiny stars. "That's you! You're a Lightner, a monster who gives Darkners like myself a purpose." He inched closer, and Noelle took in the faint outline of his glasses. "I'm sorry if it's rude to ask, but are you trying to get to the Dark World?"

Laughter rolled off her tongue. Noelle glanced around, wondering where the cameras were in the darkness to film such an outrageous prank. She searched for any blinking red lights, and finding none, she turned back to Ralsei.

Even his name was unique. The way her lips moved when she said it made her wonder where he had come from or if he was a new student. Perhaps he was a foreign exchange student from another class.

"Um, what's the Dark World?" she asked, scratching the back of her head.

Ralsei's smile faltered. He fidgeted with his sleeve. "O-oh, I guess that would be bewildering for you. Lightners haven't been in the Dark World for so long." He managed to retain his lost grin as he quickly jerked his head up. "I must sound like a hoot to you! If I had some instructions written down, then maybe this would be a lot easier to explain."

"Oh, no, no! You-you don't sound like a hoot!" Noelle waved her hands. "I mean, uh, I'm just lost. All I wanted to do was find some chalk for my teacher. I didn't think anyone else would be in here."

The way his bliss deflated like a shabby balloon as she explained herself made Noelle grimace. She was certain that either Ralsei was from a different place or he took up

role-playing to a worrying extreme. He acted like he was talking about common knowledge. Terms like "Lightners" and "Dark World" sounded like they were from a whimsical fantasy game.

"It's okay. I shouldn't have expected you to understand," Ralsei said, "but I'm glad I could meet a Lightner before the Prophecy begins. You gave me some very valuable tips about what to expect when I meet them." He giggled. "I shouldn't even be up here, but I really, really wanted to take a peek into your world."

Noelle wondered what Susie would have done her in position. She imagined Susie would've taken charge, demanding answers all while guarding Noelle as if she were her knight in casual armor. Taking a breath, she summoned her inner Susie and asked what Ralsei meant.

Ralsei hummed and glanced at the floor. He tapped his foot, almost expecting something to happen, but silence reigned supreme. He flicked his gaze back to Noelle and took in her colorful sweater. She was certainly what he expected from a Lightner, bright and full of shining hope, even if she was filled to the brim with hesitation.

It was expected. Most Darkners knew Lightners would be wary when coming face-to-face with a Darkner. He supposed he hadn't done a satisfactory job in explaining himself. Perhaps introducing himself in a dark, secluded area with no one else to hear them wasn't the best way to soothe Noelle's nerves.

"It's okay, Noelle. You don't have to know," he said, patting her forearm. With a grin, he gently turned her around and pointed in front of them. "If you walk about eight spaces behind you, then you'll reach the door."

"O-oh! Really?" Her excitement betrayed her curiosity. She counted down from eight as she took her first step. Noticing he wasn't following her, she offered a smile. "Um, I have an idea. Why don't you come out with me? Maybe we can have a better conversation if we're both in the light."

"I'd love to be in the light, but that's not where I'm supposed to be, not until this is all over, I hope," Ralsei replied, a twinge of bitterness and regret coating his words. "As the prince, I have to help the heroes of light when the time comes. If I'm not where I'm supposed to be when it begins, then everything could be all for nothing."

Noelle's lips spread into a thin line. If she was certain about anything, then it the sole fact that Ralsei lived in his own imaginary world. She felt beads of sweat dampen her brow, the stale air making her head spin. Moving farther away made her feel the slightest bit safer, but when she noticed how the outlines of his eyes lowered, she sighed.

"Um, Ralsei, I don't have a clue what you're talking about, but whatever you're going through..." Noelle reached out and gripped his shoulders, surprised by the worn fabric of his outfit as if it would shred with the slightest tug. "...I promise it's gonna be okay."

Noelle wasn't sure if her words carried any comforting weight, but the spark returned to Ralsei's eyes. He gazed at her like she was an angel descending from pure white clouds to bless him. Ralsei's sudden look of delight made Noelle's lips twitch into an uncertain grin, and she wondered what he would say until he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist. His hat almost poked her in the eye, and Noelle flicked her chin to the ceiling, resting her hands on his shoulders.

"Amazing! Lightners really can make everything feel so much better! Thank you, Noelle! Thank you!" He nuzzled against her chest, his words booming in the static closet. "I feel like I can really save the Dark World with the heroes now! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Uh, yeah! Yeah!" Noelle laughed in an octave higher than usual. "You can do it, Ralsei!"

Parting from her, Ralsei stepped away, his outline becoming fainter. As she squinted, he said, "Noelle, I hope we can meet again, and I hope that the heroes are just as wonderful as you."

Noelle counted her paces as he spoke, and suddenly, her hand connected with the door knob. Gasping, she glanced at the door and was met with silence. She called his name. No reply sounded out. Any hint of his presence vanished. Once again, Noelle faced the darkness and heard papers rustling as Ralsei retreated to a place unknown.

Swallowing, Noelle turned the knob and thrust the door open. She tumbled out into the hallway and landed on her knees, the door slamming shut behind her. Groaning, she rubbed her lightly purpled knees and peered over her shoulder. Hurrying to her feet, Noelle grasped both door knobs and sharply turned them.

The doors refused to budge. Somehow, the supply closet became locked after she was ejected. The only other person inside was Ralsei, and unless she had hallucinated that entire event, she wondered why he would seal himself inside.

What was that? Seriously, what just happened to me? Noelle rubbed her forearms and stumbled away from the closet. Gulping down her anxiety, she pivoted on her heels towards Toriel's classroom, reigniting her search for chalk.

As she reached Toriel's door, she stopped. One word lingered in her head. From their confusing conversation filled with unfamiliar terms, a single word stood out.

"Why did he call the supply closet a 'corridor?'" she whispered, and her hand limply fell back to her side.

Noelle's mind couldn't wrap around what had just happened. It was as if she didn't want to admit something strange happened to her in the midst of a dark, somehow endless supply closet. Noelle set her forehead on Toriel's door, her mouth a small gape and her eyes wide as chills trickled down her back.

Despite living in the light, Noelle realized there was so much she couldn't comprehend hiding in the dark.

Building Worlds and Friendships

leporidae

Ralsei is coming home for the weekend.

Kris hits send, then stares at the screen of their phone for a long while. When there's no immediate answer, they begin to feel antsy, and by the time ten minutes have passed, they have mentally compiled a list of interesting substances around the house that they would like to taste. Mom's soap. *The dirt at the bottom of the empty flower pot in the kitchen. The burnt grease inside the oven. The lint stuck underneath my bed.*

They're on all fours with their neck craned upwards to lick the underside of the bed when the phone beeps. Kris frowns and scuttles out from the shadows to squint at their screen.

sometimes i forget you can type since you never talk you weirdo. god that text startled me

The hint of an amused smile curls Kris's lips. Susie is always so brash, so rough around the edges; yet she's mean in a way that's impossible to hate, a way that makes you root for her despite her gruff attitude and questionable profanities. She's a — what's that anime word, again — ?

Tsundere. Yes, that's it. Kris nods to themselves. That's the term for someone who's grumpy on the outside but loving on the inside. Kris learned that one from the Mew Mew Kissy Cutie 2 DVDs Alphys loves so much.

You remember Ralsei right?

The response comes almost immediately, before Kris can think about ingesting lint.

oh yeah he moved away last year. fluffy weirdo. toothpaste boy lmao

This time Kris does smile. By Susie's standards, this conversation is outright endearing.

He wanted to know if you would like to hang out with us next weekend before he goes home.

I want you to come too.

Silence. Kris stares at their phone, stares and stares and stares until their vision blurs.

Rubbing

their eyes, they set the phone down and shimmy under the bed frame, staring up at the dust bunnies clinging there with defiance. Kris leans up with an outstretched tongue — and begins to cough as soon as the taste of dirt fills their mouth. In retrospect, dust bunnies probably have dust in their name for a reason. Protected by the privacy of their room, Kris makes a rude hand gesture at the lint, one they had learned from Susie (much to Toriel's dismay).

The phone buzzes. Instantly Kris leaps to the phone, mouthful of lint forgotten.

*uh i mean i guess but im babysitting lancer over the weekend
his dads always outta town and never even calls
i seriously wanna smash his face in
i mean uh give him a piece of my mind... but nicely
so lancer doesnt cry or something???*

It's a wonder Susie even landed a babysitting gig in the first place, considering she's infamous at school for her... colorful language. And... opinionated remarks. Luckily for her, Lancer's father doesn't care who babysits his son as long as they are present so he doesn't have to be. A bit sad for Lancer, but good for Susie's salary — although sometimes Kris does find themselves wondering what sort of adult Lancer will grow into with Susie's guidance.

(Probably an entertaining one.)

*You could bring him.
Ralsei thinks he's cute.*

Actually, Ralsei had nearly fainted the last time Lancer and Susie had both shouted the same naughty word at him in unison. But Kris conveniently doesn't mention that.

whatever i guess. ralsei's a big soft baby anyway so lancer will probably have fun.

Kris smiles. Even though Susie would never admit it, by saying that she almost certainly means *i'll have fun, too*.

Nature has always been calming for Kris. It's filled with weird bugs and weird plants that Kris finds themselves wanting to both befriend and put in their mouth (usually in that order). Everything at school is too loud and stimulating, and their classmates are so social. In comparison, the outdoors are quiet, just like them. Sometimes Kris sees a lone mushroom peeking out from the grass, or a patch of moss creeping up a tree, so unassuming and easily ignored, and it sets their mind at ease, as though there's some kind of unspoken kinship between them.

Is it strange to feel a kinship to moss? Perhaps. But that's never stopped Kris from any of their oddities before.

It is for this reason that Ralsei had chosen the park as the location for their gathering. He had always been in tune with Kris's desires, something for which they had always been grateful. Upon Kris's arrival the two share a warm hug, and while spreading out the blanket and craft materials Ralsei had brought with him to the park, the two of them tell each other stories of their lives while apart; Ralsei recounts the past few months in his timid but passionate voice, and Kris doodles their exploits with Susie and Lancer, taking great care crafting their expressions so that Ralsei can feel like he was there, too.

"There's this really fun game my friends at university taught me," Ralsei says once the two of

them have expended their tales and settled cross-legged on the blanket. “Well, um — I guess it’s not quite a game. It’s — it’s more of, um — coming up with a story together? Like a... group roleplaying thing.”

Kris waits patiently for Ralsei to overcome his nerves. Their friend is so creative and so kind, but he second-guesses himself far too often.

“Basically, we all, um — make characters, and they’re all the heroes of a story together. They go on heroic quests and have different strengths and weaknesses, fulfilling the overarching prophecy — oh, this is so stupid, isn’t it?” Ralsei pulls the fabric of his scarf over his face, fidgeting as his cheeks blush a deep pink. “This sounds so silly when I put it into words. Um, just forget it —”

Kris shakes their head and places a reassuring hand on Ralsei’s shoulder. The idea Ralsei has proposed actually sounds fairly intriguing. Living as a human in a world of monsters can sometimes be so isolating for them, but in Ralsei’s game, Kris can be anyone they want to be — even a cool, suave hero!

Eyes sparkling underneath messy bangs, their lips tug into a smile, and they give Ralsei a thumbs up.

“R-really?” Ralsei asks. “You’re sure you want to try? I-in that case —” Rummaging through his backpack with an excited squeak, he pulls out a stack of papers, some with text and some with drawings.

“I was brainstorming some concepts for us, and I wanted to make sure we all had an important role in the story, so I started working on some prophecies. At first I thought we could have our own individual destinies, but I thought it would be more fun if we were all linked together from the start. ...Also, because Susie might go off on her own and take over the story if I didn’t do that. So I thought we could have a story where the three of us were bound together by fate to fight a common evil. ‘A human, a monster, and a prince from the dark.’ Obviously you’re the human, Susie is the monster, and for myself I was thinking —”

“Kris! You didn’t tell me Ralsei wanted us to play a NERD GAME!”

In the midst of the explanation, Susie appears at the park with Lancer in tow, accusingly pointing one clawed finger in Kris’s direction. They shrug, turning to Ralsei for damage control.

“U-um...” Ralsei sits abruptly, smoothing out the blanket with nervous hands. “Well —”

“A game?!” Lancer scuttles over to sit beside Ralsei, kicking his feet in the air with excitement.

“That sounds fun! I want to make my character scary.” He cranes his neck to look at the reference sheet with the drawing of Ralsei’s character — and blows a raspberry, dissatisfied. (Ralsei makes a strangled, indignant sound as he rescues his drawings from a rain of childish spittle.) “Is that you? He looks too nice. I wanna make a really, really scary character.” A

hopeful grin is flashed in Susie's direction. "I bet your character would be super awesome and super scary. You'll help me make mine scary, right?"

"Uh. You really think so?" Susie's clawed hand rubs the back of her neck sheepishly, and though her expression remains mostly impassive, Kris can see the wobble of her lower lip as her willpower cracks. "I mean. Ugh. This sounds kinda awful? ...But since I'm an expert in scary things, I guess I have to help. Because this lame game is gonna be so boring without me." She bares her fangs menacingly at Ralsei, who shrinks back, and laughs a hearty guffaw. "If you even think you can handle me, Toothpaste Boy!"

Ralsei smiles nervously. "We're friends, Susie! Of course — of course I can handle you."

(Kris isn't fully convinced.)

"Ralsei!" Lancer squeaks, his boisterous voice cutting through the tension. "Can my character ride a bike?"

"A — a bike?" Ralsei blinks slowly, and it's clear he's struggling to reject the idea. "Well, I suppose there's no rule saying fantasy worlds can't have bikes..."

"Can the bike be on fire?" Lancer adds excitedly. "That's cool and scary, right, Susie? A flaming bike?"

"O-oh, uh..." Susie's gaze floats to the sky for a moment, then she grins. "Yeah, that's super cool and scary. What about it, Ralsei? Give the kid a flaming bike!"

"Isn't that dangerous...?" Kneading his fingers together, Ralsei desperately turns to Kris for a tiebreaker of opinion. "What do you think, Kris? U-um — do you think a flaming bike is okay?"

Kris shrugs.

Ralsei heaves a sigh. "Okay, that's fine, then. Flaming bike it is."

Lancer and Susie both give a loud whoop! and high-five one another with smug satisfaction. Kris wonders if Ralsei is beginning to regret his decision.

"What about you, Kris?" Ralsei asks, glancing over at the character reference sheet on which Kris had been quietly doodling their character concept. "What have you come up with so far?"

Kris hesitates before sliding the paper over; Susie and Lancer are too busy loudly praising one another for their ingenious flaming bike idea to notice.

Throughout their life Kris had always been a bit bothered that they had never seemed quite as... awesome as the rest of the monsters that made up their world. The idea of creating a heroic persona appealed to them, and so they had chosen a completely different color palette for their character to set them apart. The boring, everyday human Kris wears baggy shirts and shrinks back to the corner of the classroom to avoid the prying eyes of their

monster peers. This Kris, the heroic warrior Kris, has armor and a gallant sword, a regal scarf that billows in the wind, and is calm and collected in the face of danger. They can do anything, and be anyone.

“Wow, Kris! That looks really good!” Ralsei gushes.

Kris coughs and looks away, brimming with silent satisfaction.

“I want to see,” Susie says loudly, suddenly tuning into the conversation again, and she cranes her neck over Ralsei’s shoulder to view Kris’s drawings. “Uh, what’s a Chairs Ma and why is yours so high?”

“That’s charisma,” Ralsei corrects gently, “and it’s a stat that helps Kris with actions like reasoning with enemies and, um... I guess... also flirting.”

“Well, that’s sounds like a waste of time,” Susie huffs, snout crinkling with distaste as she leans back. “I don’t want my character to be full of chairs so she can kiss up to enemies. All she needs to be good at is bashing in people’s heads. With a bat, or like — ooh, a big axe. That sounds good. I want a big — no, a HUGE axe.”

“It’s good for all of our characters to have different strengths and weaknesses,” Ralsei says carefully, “so, um — if you want your character to have a lot of strength, I guess that’s fine?” The worry in his voice is not lost on Kris, though. “I was going to have my character have a high magic stat for healing spells, so our party doesn’t get injured. So if your character gets hurt fighting, I can —”

“Hey, actually —” Susie interrupts suddenly, her voice dipping to a low drawl. “I just thought of a cool catchphrase I want my character to have.”

Ralsei looks up at her timidly, and Kris braces themselves for the inevitable disaster that is about to come crashing down upon them. “Y-yes?”

What comes out of Susie’s mouth then is so vile and unspeakable that even the normally-silent

Kris gasps audibly. Ralsei practically wails at the string of profanities pouring from Susie’s lips, and Lancer himself is gazing up at her with unbridled awe as though she is a literal god amongst monsters.

He claps his hands together and giggles with delight, even as the fleeting remainder of his childish innocence is stripped away with the addition of every word.

“Susie!” Ralsei protests, aghast. “You can’t have your character say those things! It’s, um — it’s very inappropriate.”

“Is there a rule against it?” Susie leans in, her muscled silhouette towering over Ralsei’s fluffy wisp of a body.

He shrinks back, eyes darting from side to side behind the lenses of his glasses, before speaking again. "Well. I guess. Technically, no," Ralsei finally admits, "but, um. I'd prefer you... didn't?"

Kris knows that when Susie puts on her intimidating persona, it's not truly reflective of her thoughts, but Ralsei is easily intimidated and not very good at standing up for himself. It's always been Kris's unspoken job to diffuse the tension between their group born from extremely clashing personalities, and now yet again they must step up to that task.

There's a brightly-colored plant growing in a patch of grass beside the blanket. Eating strange plants is a solid tactic for diverting a conversation, right? At least, that's Kris's default idea when they can't come up with a different plan of action.

Resolutely scrunching their brow, Kris uproots the plant with a sudden yank and shoves the entire fistful between their lips.

"K-kris!" Ralsei yelps. "What did you — what was it you just put in your mouth?!"

In response to their friend's horror, Kris opens their mouth to display the chewed plant, even as their face begins to tingle and their tongue begins to swell. Perhaps this intake of unidentified vegetation hadn't been such a grand idea after all. Oh well. Kris's heroic persona wouldn't shy away from eating dangerous plants, so why should they? And despite the sudden burning of their lips, the drastic act had, in fact, distracted their friends from arguing. So it's a win in their book.

"Oh. My. GOD," Susie yells, standing suddenly. "You look awful. Are you stupid or something? We've gotta get you to the hospital."

"What about my flaming bike?" Lancer pipes up from behind her.

"Um, you'll get it later," Susie says. "Promise. I'll even help you design it to look scarier, okay?"

"Okay!"

Susie hoists Kris onto her back as Ralsei frantically calls the hospital, and Kris can't help but smile, even though the very act itself hurts their face. When Susie and Ralsei are both worried about Kris, the two of them put aside their differences and work well together. Useful information to keep in mind to maintain the peace of their future brainstorming sessions, Kris thinks.

Now if only their tongue wasn't so darn *itchy*.

The Winter Celebration of a Lifetime!

MezzoSesu

"Do you guys get snow here or what?" Susie asked, scooping out a handful of salsa from the tree stump. She offered a portion of it to Kris, who took it with a nod of thanks, before gobbling down her own share greedily.

Ralsei glanced at the two of them with a puzzled expression. When the two had come through the portal to visit him, he had expected to show them around the Dark World, to take them to places that they had missed on their first adventure. However, for some reason, both Susie and Kris had been excited about the Tree Stump Salsa, a recently coined term for the weird mess of goop Susie and Lancer had shared from a honeypot in, well, the stump of a tree.

He didn't quite see the appeal of eating food from an unknown tree, but he wasn't going to stop them from having their fun.

"Yes? It isn't a lot, usually, but it makes the scenery look pretty! What about you guys?" He glanced over at Kris expectantly, hoping to bring them into the conversation. Even though the three of them had become friendly after the fight against the King, he was still a little wary around Susie and preferred to have Kris engaged until he felt a little more comfortable. Kris put a hand to their chin in thought. After a moment, they said that it snowed quite a bit in their world. Sometimes it was enough to cancel school, which made all the students happy.

Ralsei frowned slightly. "While I don't really understand your world that well, I can't imagine school is that bad. After all, who doesn't like learning?"

"Nerd," Susie coughed. Kris snorted beside her, and Ralsei felt his frown deepen.

"Hey, I like learning!" The other two only snorted harder. Ralsei let it go with a sigh. At least they were having a good time, even if it was at his expense. "So, what do you two do when you have the time off?"

"Well, I don't know about this nerd--" Susie jerked a thumb at Kris before continuing-- "But I like to go sledding. I have a really cool one that I take to the tallest hill in town to make all the other losers jealous!"

Kris informed him that Susie's 'cool' sled was nothing more than a thick sheet of metal, much to Susie's dismay.

"Hey! That's still plenty cool! I bet you don't do anything but hang around with your mom and bake dumb pies."

Kris nodded, giving Susie a thumbs-up. "Wait, really?"

Another nod.

Susie groaned and rubbed a hand over her face. "Man, Kris, we gotta get you out of the house. Ugh, anyway, what about you, Ralsei? I bet you get to do a lot of neat sh--stuff. Since, you know, you don't have school or anything taking up all your time."

"Well, I'm by myself a lot so I don't really get to do much... B-but don't worry! I'm okay being by myself."

"Wait, you've never had friends before, right?"

"I wouldn't say never--"

"And you don't do any sort of exciting stuff in the winter?" "I mean no, but--"

"Alright, Kris, grab the nerd," Susie barked, getting to her feet. "We're gonna show him the time of his life!"

She strapped her ax to her back and put her hands on her hips decisively. Before Ralsei could wrap his head around what was happening, Kris buried their arms underneath his armpits and hoisted him up.

"W-wait, where are we going?!" Ralsei squeaked in alarm as he squirmed in Kris's hold. Kris barely budged and only seemed to grip Ralsei tighter, much to his chagrin. Neither friend answered him as they started walking toward the Field's entrance, leaving Ralsei to get dragged along, confused and slightly terrified at whatever was about to happen next.

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The first stop on their way to the 'Winter Celebration of a Lifetime! [title pending]' was to the Dimensional Door. Susie had been bashful when Ralsei had innocently asked why and had admitted that she wanted to invite Lancer on their fun adventures. He knew they were close, and even though he and Lancer had been on opposite sides only a short time ago, Ralsei liked him. Besides, the more the merrier, right?

Susie led their party through the doorway, and when they exited Ralsei found himself glancing up at the exterior of the Card Castle. The walls were pitch black, clashing harshly with the bright suit cards framing the edges of the building. Despite seeing this place more than a few times on his excursions, he could never get used to how eerie it was.

The three of them approached the Castle doors, Susie in front, Kris behind her, and Ralsei...

"Ummm, Kris?" Ralsei asked, still trapped in their arms. "I can walk by myself now so, uh... you don't need to carry me." He felt the air of Kris exhaling against his neck and then nearly jumped when Kris rubbed their face against his fur. He was on the precipice of asking what they were doing when he heard the content sigh. Right, Kris was addicted to hugging him, weren't they?

"Okay, um, nevermind, this is fine."

They took the elevator up to the fifth floor, and after passing by Roulxs Kaard's shop and walking up a couple of flights of steps, found themselves face to face with the acting king Lancer himself.

"Hey, it's the Lancer Fan Club!" Lancer exclaimed, jumping out of his chair. He made a beeline for Susie, opening his arms wide for a hug. Surprisingly, Susie allowed it, wrapping him up in a large hug that made Ralsei smile. Looked like she had learned something from Kris's ACTing lessons after all.

After a beat, Susie remembered herself and broke the hug with an embarrassed blush. She stepped back in line with Kris and Ralsei.

"Ahem, King Lancer, nice to see you again."

"It's great to see you too, Susie, Prince, blue person whose name I've forgotten!" Ralsei glanced up at Kris but they merely shrugged as if to say, 'eh, doesn't bother me'. "What brings you guys here?"

"Ralsei here--" Susie pointed at Ralsei, who waved shyly in response--"Has never done any sort of fun winter activities, can you believe it?"

Lancer gasped. "No!"

"I know! We're gonna go do some fun stuff with him, like sledding! Want to come with?"

Lancer's smile fell slightly, and he looked down at his hands. "While I would love to come help show that Delectable Apple Pie--"

Was that what he called him?

"-- a super fun time, I can't just leave! I have too many Dadly duties to attend to. But, I can tell you guys where the best place to sled is. It's my special spot, but for you clown--er, I mean best pals, I'll make an exception and tell you."

Ralsei looked at Susie. Despite her nonchalant expression, her shoulders were slumped and her fingers clenched down at her sides. However, instead of voicing her disappointment Susie only grinned.

"That sounds great Lancer, thanks!"

As the two of them exchanged info, Ralsei whispered to Kris, "Susie sure has changed, huh? She used to be a little... trying to deal with, but now she's really nice!"

Kris hummed thoughtfully into his fur. They said that while Susie might be a little rough around the edges, she was very loyal to her friends, and that when she promised something she worked hard to stick with it.

"Friends..." Ralsei glanced over at Susie, who was laughing uproariously at something Lancer had said to her. Ever since they had met, he had considered her a friend, but did she consider them friends now as well? Was that why she was so insistent on helping him?

Susie walked back over and waved a piece of paper in her hands excitedly. "Okay, I know where to go! Let's go have some fun!"

~° ✧ ✧~° ✧ ✧*~° ✧

"Um... Are you sure about this?" Ralsei squeaked, peering down and over the cliffside. When Susie had mentioned a 'hill', he had imagined something small and unassuming, like the little slope he saw in the Forest. The Darkner guards always seemed to enjoy sliding down it, and he bet he would've enjoyed it too, especially with his friends. He could imagine rolling down with Susie and Kris and landing in a giggling pile at the bottom. It also would've felt more wintry, especially since the whole idea about doing this was for the 'Winter Celebration of a Lifetime [title still pending]'.

Instead, Ralsei stood at the edge of a very large cliff, one that he recognized as near his own vacant kingdom. Dark, sludge-like water flowed out a crack slightly below the drop, preventing him from seeing the bottom. Even though he knew it ended in a sizable water puddle, the sight unnerved him. He wouldn't call this a slope, more like a 90-degree drop straight down. The small sled made of sticks and rope wouldn't help him slide down this at all. That was if it even survived the fall. He peeked back timidly at Susie and Kris who were on separate sleds of their own.

He had pitched making a sled that would be able to house the three of them but quickly found that the materials available to them didn't make that possible.

"I'm having second thoughts..." Stammered Ralsei.

"Oh, come ON." Susie slammed the ground with her palm. "Kris and I have slid down this hill before and we're fine!"

'That's because you two are almost indestructible,' Ralsei wanted to say but decided to refrain. "I don't know..."

"Don't be a pansy! Kris, say something to him!"

Ralsei glanced at Kris hopefully. They were much more level-headed than Susie; surely, they would see what a bad idea this was and call it off, right? Kris flicked their gaze from Ralsei to the escarpment, and after a moment gave Ralsei an enthusiastic thumbs-up. It was supposed to read as 'Good luck! It'll be fun', Ralsei supposed, but all he could hear was: 'I'll make sure to bury you with your favorite things!'

Sighing, Ralsei placed the sled on the cliff edge and took a seat in the middle of it. He peered over his feet at the drop below and immediately regretted it. This was crazy, crazy and ridiculous, ridiculous and downright stupid. But... he'd do it for friendship. His stomach

heaved terribly as he scooted the sled forward an inch and, after a quick prayer and a farewell smile to his friends, pushed himself over the ledge.

The scenery whizzed by in a blur as Ralsei fell at breakneck speeds. He tried to scream, but the only sound that came out of his mouth was an unholy cross between a bleat and a wheeze. Distantly he could hear Susie's loud whooping and, if he focused really hard, Kris's armor clanging against itself. At some point, the fall became too much for Ralsei, and white spots appeared behind his eyes, growing larger by the second. He wondered if he was dying. Was this the bright light of the Deltarune whisking him away to the other side?

When Ralsei came to, he let out a stuttered gasp. His SOUL thumped in his chest and he realized that, yes, he did just do that. He had taken a sled and had just... pushed himself off. An odd mix of fear and exhilaration threatened to come back for a repeat performance, but eventually both petered out to leave Ralsei simply exhausted. He slowly opened his eyes, pushing himself into a sitting position. His body ached in protest, and he couldn't help the small groan that escaped him. Splintered wood dug into the back of his robe (thankfully the material was thick enough to prevent it from piercing through), and nearby he heard the other two stumbling to their feet as well.

"You alive, goat boy?" Susie called, closer than he had realized, and before he knew it she was whisking him to his feet. "I kinda forgot how tough that damn hill was. How are you feeling?"

"Still alive, miraculously," Ralsei said. He used his hands to dust off the wood and debris from his clothing, and when he was done he smiled at Susie. "That was exciting... but maybe a little too exciting for me. A-ah, but I still had fun though, promise!"

Susie laughed and clapped a hand on Ralsei's shoulder firmly. "Don't worry pal, I know this was kind of a bust, but I'm hap--er, I mean--" She coughed. "You didn't die, so that's good. Anyway, it's Kris's turn for an activity now. They mentioned wanting to bake or something, right Kris?"

Ralsei heard a soft approving noise behind him.

Susie nodded. "That's more up your alley, yeah?"

"I do love to bake! But... I don't have any baking materials, unfortunately."

Another gloved hand made its home on Ralsei's shoulder, and he turned around to come face-to-face with Kris. They had a glint in their eye, and Ralsei gulped.

Susie laughed. "Ha, can't win against Kris when they get that determined! Ready to go?"

On one hand, he was sure that he was done with his friend's plans for Winter Celebrations [is this really the title we're going with?]. He was tired, achy, and nowhere near clean enough to be in the same vicinity as food. But on the other hand, it would be rude to leave his friends hanging, especially when they were working so hard to give him a fun experience.

So, with that in mind, Ralsei smiled and gave his friends a shy thumbs-up. "I'm ready, I think. Onto the next adventure!"

Cake and Cocoa

RiN

"I'm so glad you two could make it today!" Ralsei beamed, looking at the table filled with ingredients for his cake and feeling excited to get started as soon as possible.

"Sure. It's free food, right?" Susie grinned, her teeth shining brightly at the thought.

"Yes, but not only that, it's food we'll all make together as friends!"

While Ralsei was expecting something akin to a three-cheers from their group, the response he did get could be summed up as crickets chirping. At least there was some sound.

"What's so fun about prepping cake? Can't we just, sit back and watch you make it?"

Susie crossed her arms, and seemed legitimately serious about her question. Ralsei wasn't sure how to address this as cordially as he could.

"I thought today we'd make a friendship cake, and you can't really make that without your friends... right?" Ralsei asked, nudging his glasses back up his nose as they began to slip. "That's the whole point of it?"

"Nah, I'm a little tired to really wanna bake. Besides, if I get near that stuff, I doubt I'd make anything good..." Susie muttered, staring at the bag of flour like she was considering eating it in one go.

"But you and Lancer managed to sell some cookies at the baking sale," Ralsei interjected.

"Lancer was the one who made them," Susie snorted and began to look for a place to lay down to relax.

"Then Kris and I will help you through it! Right Kris?" Ralsei chirped, turned to Kris who had remained as silent as ever staring at the abundance of ingredients.

Kris nodded. Baking sounded like fun. Toriel was the one who did most of the cooking and baking while Kris usually swiped whatever food was made and avoided answering Toriel's probing questions when asked if they ate any of the butterscotch pie. Even when the evidence of crumbs and filling covered their lips.

"Yay! Fun Gang, time to get baking!" Ralsei cheered and rushed to the table in excitement.

"Can't I do something else?" Susie asked, staring at the carton of eggs as if contemplating whether or not to throw them onto the ground.

"Well, the cake will taste a lot better if we all do it together. When it's done baking, we can take it over to Lancer!"

Susie's shoulders loosened at the thought, "Heh, got nothing better to do, and Lancer does like sweet stuff."

Ralsei cheered once more, "Fun Gang, unite!"

"Stop calling us the Fun Gang and I'll do what you say..." Susie growled, but not as violently as she usually would.

Ralsei began animatedly rattling off the ingredients and steps to making the cake. While Kris began to pick up all of the dry ingredients, they stared at the bag of chocolate, now beginning to crave some cocoa.

"Kris, I understand if you can't wait to eat some chocolate, but could you wait until after we finish the cake?" Ralsei turned to their human companion, but Kris was too lost in thought to respond. "Kris?"

Kris turned to their monster friend, quietly nodding and grabbing measuring cups at Ralsei's orders. As they poured the chocolate pieces into a pan and started to boil them down, Ralsei wrangled Susie away from pouring a whole bag of sugar into the mixing bowl as the smell of warm chocolate wafted around Kris.

They began going through memories. A past that seemed so distant and lonesome the longer they pondered over it.

Hot chocolate. Their usual bar seat by the window. A drawing of four flowers.

"Pretty cold today, huh Kris?" Asriel asked, blowing into his furry hands as they waited for their cocoa to arrive. "Perfect day for hot chocolate to warm us up."

Kris said nothing, but Asriel didn't mind. Most of the time, Asriel could tell what his younger sibling was thinking whenever they chose not to speak, and Kris was fine with that. Also, the human was a little preoccupied with the paper and crayons in front of them, coloring in a field of multi-colored flowers, like the ones found in their father's flower shop.

"Here, you should take off your scarf or you'll get too hot in here."

Asriel leaned across the table to try and undo the green scarf around Kris' neck that their mother had knitted for each of them, while his own magenta one laid neatly at his side. Kris obliged by tilting their head forward to make the unravelling easier on Asriel, but remained focused on their drawing.

"You've been coloring that for a while, is that going to go on our fridge?"

Kris nodded, their eyes focused and filling in whatever spaces they could.

Asriel took to clasping his hands together and staring out the window to view the passer-by's and the town. Kris didn't pay the view much mind as they continued to scribble away at the

paper. The corner booth was their favorite spot, and while Asriel wanted to coax Kris into drawing breath shapes on the window like they used to, Kris either didn't feel like doing it today, or was purposefully ignoring their sibling. Asriel didn't want to pressure them, so their booth was filled with the silence and watching things move outside the window. It was peaceful.

Soon, they were approached by the shopkeeper, who held two steaming mugs of hot chocolate in her paws, smiling down at the two.

"Two hot chocolates for you, hun," she purred, placing the two mugs down on the table. Asriel

happily took his while Kris moved their drawing away to grab their mug. "I made it just how you two like it."

"Thank you," Asriel replied after blowing on the mug, Kris merely nodded.

They continued to sit in silence as they drank their cocoa, savoring the chocolatey warmth seeping down their throat and warming their insides.

"This will be one of the last times I'll be at QC's Diner with you Kris, and I'm sad to be going away soon."

While Asriel tried to engage in some nostalgic memories of their childhood, Kris just wasn't taking the initiative to interact. That was their usual response to things, but it didn't sit well with Asriel. He worried that Kris was just going through the flow of life and not really making a conscience choice to act on their own volition.

"I'm going to miss this," Asriel said, looking up from his mug with a hot chocolate and whipped cream mustache that usually brought a grin to Kris' face. "Soon I'll be off to college and be as busy as ever."

Kris merely stared ahead at their brother, not really taking into the warmth from the mug of cocoa while the chocolatey liquid slowly turned sour in their mouth. The chocolate foam around Asriel's lips even failed to bring a giggle out of them. This didn't feel like a warm and happy occasion, no matter how hard Asriel tried to make it so.

"That's why you gotta stay in school Kris, so you can go to college too."

Kris thought of their school, the classes with other monsters. Nothing really stood out to them, so why should they put in the effort for something like that?

"Why?" Kris asked, breaking the silence with an inquisitive and quiet tone.

"Because then you can do more things after you graduate from college," Asriel answered simply, as easily as he would for any of his tests. "You could be anything you want to be. You'll know what choices you want to make for your life, and how you want to live it."

Kris refreshed the chocolatey sweetness in their mouth by sipping from the mug. It still tasted just as sweet as before.

“

Kris, can you promise me something?”

Kris didn’t acknowledge their brother as they began to stir the mushy marshmallows in their mug with a spoon, watching the bundle of sugar slowly dissolve.

“Kris, after I leave, I want you to try and make some friends.” Asriel took another sip of his cocoa, his smile turning a little sad. “I know it can be hard for you, but I can’t always be your only friend forever.”

“Can’t you?” Kris asked, gripping their mug tightly.

It was hard for them to make friends. They were more comfortable being by themselves. Asriel was a great friend, one Kris felt extremely close to, and they did so many things together. To have to let go of all that and open up to others about themselves? Kris was incredibly doubtful of that happening. If anything were to happen like that, it almost felt like it wouldn’t even be by their own choice.

“Just...try, Kris. You never know what kind of adventures new friends will bring you along for. What you can learn from them can be even more than I could ever teach you on my own.”

Once more, Kris was silent as they downed more hot chocolate, but at this point, it was more of an excuse not to talk even when the liquid still burned a little. There was no real reason to try and uphold that promise, so they gave no reply. Asriel, as usual, understood what Kris’ silence meant, and didn’t try to force the subject any further.

“Just consider what I said,” he said gently, blowing on his mug again as he took another sip. Kris returned to drinking from their mug, trying to see if they could get the marshmallow to stick to their upper lip.

“Kris, look!”

Kris looked at Ariel and nearly spat up the hot chocolate they had just sipped. There was whipped cream on Asriel’s nose, a bigger brown lip mustache and two marshmallows sticking to his furry cheeks. Kris couldn’t help but shiver as they tried to contain their giggles.

“Monster Man!” Asriel declared and Kris just about lost it.

This was all they wanted. A small corner of the diner with just them and Asriel enjoying their afternoon with cocoa while trying to make the other laugh. Having to learn to let this go wouldn’t be easy for Kris, but for Asriel, they would try. One day, they would try.

“Kris! Kris!” Ralsei said, and the human turned to their emerald cloaked friend who was looking at them with a worry. “You’ve been kind of out of it while we were making the cake. You mistook the salt for sugar, and Susie almost used cocoa powder instead of chocolate for the cake.”

"Maybe it's because your instructions were so boring," Susie cackled. "I'm taking a break."

"We've barely started!" Ralsei huffed, but Susie just shrugged her shoulders and walked away from the two of them which lead Ralsei to sigh. "Well, we can always continue later, no rush in making this cake."

Kris looked down at the bowl in front of them that was just filled with white powder and when they looked back up, Susie was holding up a mug of hot chocolate.

"Found some of this in a bag and thought you guys would want some."

"Susie, that's so nice of you," Ralsei beamed, taking the mug that Susie handed to him.

"It's just powder and hot water, nothin' special," Susie grumbled. "Thought it would help after all our hard work."

Ralsei sipped his hot chocolate and beamed like a proud parent.

"It's so yummy, thank you Susie!"

There seemed to be a faint hint of a blush on her cheeks as she turned to Kris.

"Right. So how 'bout you? Don't like hot chocolate?"

Kris stared at their mug, simply smiled and took a long sip. It was warm and sweet, something they hadn't had in a while.

This was nice. Having something like this didn't seem so bad. For Ralsei and Susie, they could try.

after the tone

RyeFo

Autumn's swept its paintbrush over your quaint little town, there're kids playing in the leaves a baby step's pace away, and you're hidden away, huddled up under the old oak tree that's served as your refuge more than once.

Once, in a fit of childish arrogance, you'd grabbed a knife and tried to carve your name into the bark. Asgore caught you after your third slip up, and it's began to heal from the scars you inflicted onto it.

Third time's the charm, but you never finished carving. Your hand traces over the barely-legible names, splinters missing your skin by inches;

Fri—
Cha—
Kri—

Kris. That's your name.

Those other names were mistakes from old games you used to play.

(Maybe.)

You sigh, taking your hand back to your side.
"

When Asgore caught you that day, stuck with splinters in your hand and your big brother watching your rebellion in awe, Asriel immediately took the blame. Said it was all his idea, refused to give you up despite you being caught red-handed.

You just stayed silent.

Asgore didn't believe him, of course. Neither did Toriel. But none of you were punished. You never were, if Asriel took the blame.

Something in your head began to nag at you, and you cleared those thoughts from your mind, instead ignoring nostalgia and looking up at the sky. You know that, soon, the world will grow dark, that starlight will be your only glimpse of light.

Unless you looked through Asriel's eyes, obviously. Your brother always had lenses made from sunshine. Everything looked golden to him.

...You take your phone out of your pocket and flip it open. You're greeted with the picture of you and your family, and the usual number of missed calls from Asriel growing.

It's at 14, now. There're 3 voice messages.

You purse your lips, something pulsating painfully in your chest. You're pulling on your sweater for a few seconds before your sweaty palms press play on the first message from a week ago.

Asriel's static-coated voice fills your ears.

"...Heya, Kris! Mom says that you've been eating all the pie again! C'mon, can't you save me and Dad a slice next time I come to visit? Anyway, I know you've got tests and stuff—man, University is a lot busier than I thought it'd be—but call me back so we can arrange to hang, okay? Bye!"

It clicks off.

The grip on your phone becomes a little sweaty. There's a brief memory that rings in your mind—the sound of your mother's happy voice filling the downstairs living room as you stayed upstairs with your nose buried in a book. That was last week.

Toriel hadn't laughed like that since.

Your heart rings in your ears when you press the next one.

"Ah, I caught your answering machine again? Damn. Well, no point beating around the bush! Thought I ask straight out: there's this event going on for University, and we're allowed to bring a guest! A few people have asked me there but..."

You hear him laugh a little awkwardly. *"You're my best friend. I'd rather have you there. There'll be free food, and it won't even be that long! Just—just let me know? Anyway, talk later, Kris!"*

There's a sigh of relief on his end before the message ends.

You fail to notice the shadow out of the corner of your eye, approaching you closer as you gulp, swallowing down any last hesitation before listening to the last message Asriel left for you.

The date on the message is today's.

"...Hey, Kris."

His tone has a sense of foreboding. You can feel the shadows encroaching you with how guilty you are—how much you've not listened to him.

"I'm sorry if I've done something to upset you." Your heart pulsates painfully, gripping your chest with your hand until you feel the skin break. Yet, he carries on. "I know me leaving for University may have... I don't know, made you feel even more alone. Especially after Dad left, and I wasn't all-that communicative when I first got here."

You hear fabric rustling—maybe he’s lying on his bed when he sent you this, surrounded by all the books you used to read together. *“It was hard for me to settle in, too. But I want you to know I’m here for you. If you ever need me, I’m waiting.”*

He sighs deeply. You can see that famous, bittersweet smile on your brother’s face—you wonder what he’d think if you told him about Ralsei’s smile, too? —and he says, *“until I get back, be good, okay?”*

Asriel’s voices fades with the static, and you snap your phone shut.

With a sigh, you lean your head back on the tree, letting your eyes peak through your unruly Bangs.

Be good, he says. *Be good, okay?* Like Toriel used to say, like Asgore used to preach, like you used to try and do.

You’re thinking even deeper about your situation when—

A sudden fist *smacks* the back of your head and makes your head spin, filling your eyes with Red.

“Are you still moping around?” Susie barks, dropping down next to you and glaring. “You haven’t moved from here all day.”

You’re holding your head and trying to soothe the shooting pains, pointing a justified glare right back at Susie. She’s got a cigarette hanging between her teeth that you promptly take away and crush between your fingers.

“Spoilsport.” Susie says, before resting her head on her hand and looking at you. “So, what’s eating you?”

Immediately, you withdraw, huddling back into a ball—until Susie grabs your shoulder. “Nuh-uh, you’re not doing that.” She forces you to sit upright. “Look, your Mom keeps looking for you, asked me to keep an eye out. But I’m not delivering a dead-eyed kid to her.”

When she notices it’s not working, her tone turns a little softer. “Hey,” she nudges your shoulder. “Just fess up, yeah? I’m not going anywhere.”

The look in her eyes is of pure defiance—it hits you that she’s not afraid to battle your own fears for you. Susie is many things, but you think that, most of all, she’s—

(Determined.)
Undeterred.

You take a breath, before showing her your phone. She scans over it, leaning in forward. “Missed calls?” She raises a brow. “From your brother?”

You nod, snapping your phone shut and shrugging.

"Well, why's that a problem?"

Your hands clench into hardened fists; she forcibly prises them open, so you cling to her hands instead.

"He's not been around much?" You shake your head. "...You've not been around much?"

When you shrink into your shoulders, she clicks her tongue. "Ah, I see."

She still holds onto your hands, and you pray your sweater sleeves don't fall lower than your wrists. "You've been ignoring him. Feeling lonely, so striking back in any way you can. That Right?"

You blink up at her, managing a stiff nod.

"Yeah, I've been there." She brings your hands down slowly, and sighs. "But it does no good to run from your problems, Kris. You gotta face them head on."

She gestures with a move of her head to your phone. "There's different ways we can approach stuff, yeah? Make that first step, because your bro's already waiting for you."

You drag your eyes to your phone and purse your lips.

There are too many things to say to Asriel.

What do you even start with? How low your mother has been feeling, how your father has become so isolated? There's too many cracks and threads that you're scared to even attempt at weaving that tale together. How about when the bully of the year is now sitting with you, convincing you to speak to your brother—when days prior, she'd slammed you into a locker and threatened to kill you?

How she's your friend? How someone so familiar to your brother—bordering on identical, exists in a shadowed-version of an abandoned classroom?

[RESET?]

Where do you start?

You bury your head in Susie's shoulder and grit your teeth, taking a moment before pulling away from her hands.

"Kris?" She tilts her head, that familiar crooked grin giving you pause. "You ready?"

You point at your phone, and she, without another word, Susie grabs it and simply tosses it to you. You catch it with a practised sense of ease. As you flip it open, you stare at your screen. At that familiar picture, under that familiar tree, with bandages covering your hands and fingers.

For once, you manage to escape your own head. And, sure, it takes you a moment before you're ready. But after a deep breath, you do it.

You press a button, open your mouth, and feel the words that eluded you, begin to flow.

Because, this time, you know, as you look at Susie, that it doesn't matter how far you shut yourself off.

Someone's always with you, even in the dark.

Making Something Together

SnakeWrangler

Susie wiped sweat from her brow as she worriedly peered into the oven. "Come on, come on..." she whispered, increasingly impatient, to a tin of muffins as they stood baking.

"SUSIE!!"

The purple reptilian nearly jumped through the ceiling from surprise. "GAH!" Composing herself, Susie turned to find Lancer wearing his usual goofy smile. "Lancer, what do you want? I'm trying to focus here!" she half-snarled.

Unphased by Susie's fierce display, Lancer continued, "I just wanted to see how your baking was going! I think mine's almost done!!" A small trail of smoke began to stream out of the oven behind the rotund boy, as if to confirm his assertion. Lancer sniffed the air and grinned even wider. "Yep! That smells done!"

He waddled over to his own oven and hopped up to pull the door down, smoke billowing out and completely obscured the scene. As Susie looked on with growing concern (and gratitude that Card Castle seemed to lack smoke alarms), she asked, "What DID you make anyway, Lancer?"

Behind the impromptu smokescreen, Lancer donned a pair of spade-embroidered oven mitts (with matching booties!) and climbed onto the open door with a "Hup!". He carefully leaned forward, gingerly grasping his creation to pull it out from the oven.

Coughing and trying to wave away the smoke from her face, Susie strained her eyes to see what all was going on behind the cloud of smoke. Finally, a shape began to form before her; Lancer soon emerged, clearly immensely proud of his work. Beaming, he held out his creation and announced: "Ta-dah! It's Stump Salsa, everyone's favorite! It's the only recipe I really know, but that's OK, because who doesn't like Stump Salsa?" Lancer's tongue hung out to complete his trademark grin.

Susie stood dumbstruck at the sight of the spade gremlin presenting a gnarled, old stump, nearly as big as he was, and full of chunky red salsa. Mouth agape, she stared at the stump, then Lancer, then the oven, then back at the stump, cycling through them in quick succession. "Wha... But... How...?"

Lancer remained unphased by Susie's reaction. "Wanna try some? Just get a lil' scoop! It's good, I promise!" To accentuate his point, Lancer produced a plastic bag full of wriggling pink worms, "FOR LANCER" written on it in bold letters. He carefully picked a worm out, dipped it in the salsa, and slurped up the whole thing in one go. "DELICIOUS! Who knew I could even be this good at cooking?? Susie, you have to try some! Go ahead - use your finger, I won't tell anyone!"

Still suspecting that she was in shock, Susie eyed the wooden vat of salsa. She was unsure how much she trusted Lancer's concoction, but she hardly wanted to hurt his feelings by refusing to try it. Gingerly, she stuck a finger in at the edge of the stump's basin and pulled up a smear of salsa. Before committing to tasting it, Susie felt compelled to ask, "Lancer, how did you even get that stump in OR out of the oven? It looks bigger than the door."

Setting the stump on the floor, Lancer put a hand to his chin to ponder the constraints imposed by the inescapable binding that physics has on reality. Or maybe he just thought about candy. Either way, he snapped his fingers as if he had an epiphany. Proudly, Lancer proclaimed, "I HAVE NO IDEA!!!"

Susie just shook her head and decided to give up any further line of questioning. She relented and licked the salsa sample off her finger. It indeed tasted, honestly a bit surprising to Susie, just like a typical tomato salsa. But that was perfectly fine. Lancer put his heart into it. "...Tastes great, Lancer. Good job."

Hearing the compliment, Lancer's expression lit up bright enough to light an ocean trench. His enthusiasm was almost overwhelming. "Really? You think so? Thanks, Susie! I can't wait to share this with everyone else! I'm sure yours will be great too! I'm so excited!"

Caught off-guard by Lancer's encouragement, Susie looked aside in an attempt to hide her fluster. "...Anytime. And thanks. I sure hope -" She was cut off by a loud beeping coming from her own oven. The muffins were ready!

Susie bounded over to the oven and hurriedly lowered the door before the muffins could burn. Donning a pair of oversized oven mitts, Susie delicately extracted the tin of muffins, exercising more caution than expected from a fighter that brandishes a giant axe. She carefully set the tin on the stovetop, removed the oven mitts, and reached for the finishing touch to her treat: a fine dusting of chalk powder on top. Satisfied, Susie arranged the muffins on a large plate and stepped back, taking a moment to admire her handiwork. "Heh. Not half bad," she chuckled to herself. "Can't wait to see Ralsei's face when he learns he's not the only one that can bake these days!"

Susie and Lancer turned to face each other, completed creations in hand, and nodded in approval at their mutual success. The duo carried their respective treats over to a large spade-shaped table, high-fiving in celebration once the muffins and stump were set down, Lancer requiring a small stool to actually reach the top of the table.

"Great job, Susie! I'm sure we'll win this baking competition. What a great and fun idea you had to hold this! Thanks a bunch!!" Lancer's tongue flopped out in his excitement, making Susie quickly edge the muffins away to avoid any unwelcome stray Droplets.

Susie scratched the back of her head as she looked to the side, suddenly sheepish. "Well, honestly, it was more of Ralsei's idea to do something like this together... I just thought it'd be fun to turn it competitive. He deserves more thanks for the idea, not me." She shook her head and looked back at Lancer. "We ought to thank you as well - you let us use your huge kitchen here at the castle, after all."

If Lancer's goofy grin could get any wider, it was liable to fall off his face. "Golly, you really think so? I'm glad you like it, because I just wanted to help out all my great friends!!"

Coincidentally, when Lancer said this, Susie's eyes began to sting a little, to the point of watering a tiny bit. She told herself it was unrelated, at any rate, with absolutely no connection whatsoever to how Lancer's words touched her. "Great friends... Yeah..." she managed through a subtly growing smile.

Lancer, oblivious, went on to think aloud. "I wonder if all the others are -"

As if on queue, the door to an adjacent kitchen swung open. The ever-fluffy Ralsei strolled out, holding a tray with a modest cake, as well as a smile pure enough to melt the coldest of hearts. He was followed closely by Kris, who curiously seemed to be empty-handed, their ever-enigmatic expression betraying no emotions.

Ralsei was the first to speak upon arriving. "Susie! Lancer! Glad to see you've completed your treats as well!" He eyed over the muffins and Stump Salsa. "These look really great! I'm sure they're delicious!" he exclaimed, his smile only getting wider. "You're certainly no slouches when it comes to baking, it seems."

Setting his own cake on the table, Ralsei motioned for Kris to place their own confectionary creation as well. Kris obliged by wordlessly reaching into their pocket and retrieving a sizeable clump of damp, verdant moss. Put on the table, it looked undeniably out of place next to the already ragtag assortment of muffins, a cake, and a stump full of salsa. At least it looked like enough moss for everyone to share, but no one was really sure how much qualified as "enough" in this scenario.

Words failed Susie once more. The Stump Salsa was one thing, sure, but moss? From an oven? How -

Her minor inner crisis was halted as she made eye contact with Ralsei. He shook his head, doing his best to convey, "No, it isn't worth questioning, trust me." Susie then looked over at Kris, who gave her a thumbs up with the usual blank expression. With a squint, she noticed some moss hanging from the corner of Kris' mouth. At that point, Susie shrugged and decided another line of questions was a less fulfilling use of her time than enjoying all the treats her companions had prepared.

Looking quite pleased at the sight of the baked goods laid out on the table, Ralsei spoke up. "Gosh, everyone's treats look so good! I -" He cut himself off as realization hit him. "Wait. Aren't we missing someone...?"

With that question, the group of friends heard a caterwaul from another nearby room. Into the kitchen burst the dazzling Rouxls Kaard, looking much less dazzling than

usual as he sputtered with tears running down his face. "Alack, alay!" he proclaimed in a pained wail, "Mine perfect creation doth hath been ruinedest! A blight uponeth mine self, for assuredly thus failing to impresseth Lancer and his companions!"

The other four were at a loss for words. Lancer, however, quickly recovered and waddled over to Rouxls. "Great to see you, Lesser Dad! What happened??"

Rouxls Kaard sniffed and attempted to wipe his eyes, then laid on the floor and pretended to faint for good dramatic measure. "Woeth is me, Lancer, for a tragedy hath befallen mine culinary attempts..." He produced a singular piece of slightly-burnt toast from his coat and held it in the air for all to behold, in what was most assuredly great pity for this tragic occurrence. "Yonder toastereth... I thoughteth for surest it hath been set to only '6'..." Rouxls gasped, clutching his other hand to his chest as he waved the singed slice of bread above him. "To mine owneth dismay, it actually had been set to '7'! Thus bestowingeth unto me this horridest, most incincerated piece of toast..." Mustering up his best attempt at puppy dog eyes, Rouxls Kaard looked up at Lancer, who had listened to all this wearing his usual goofy demeanor. "If thou haveth in thyself... Please, doth forgivest me for this insult to thine culinary contest...!"

Lancer pondered this sob story for all of 3 seconds before taking the piece of toast and eating it whole. "Mmmm! Tastes fine to me! Thanks for the snack, Lesser Dad, you really are the best!" he said as he returned to his spot by the spade-shaped table. Rouxls shed a single, final tear of gratitude at Lancer's overwhelmingly magnanimous clemency, then proceeded to stand up, brush himself off, and slink back into his own kitchen while vowing to "Right what he hath wrongethed." That situation more or less resolved, the friend group returned their attention to what they all had baked.

"Well, Susie?" began Ralsei. "Whose do you think is going to be the best?"

Ralsei, Kris, and Lancer all looked at her expectantly.

"Oh, er..." Susie started to wonder why she rashly asked to turn a fun baking day into a competition. "They... They all look good!" she answered, both out of honesty and a desire to not be forced to choose. "I think, uh, everyone did a great job today, and, uh..." She trailed off, flustered and unsure how to continue.

She was met with a good-natured laugh from Ralsei. "Hahaha! I think we all agree on that, Susie. It seems everyone " Kris and Lancer both nodded enthusiastically to affirm Ralsei's point. "I had a lot of fun, at any rate! I'm glad we were all able to come together and bake today. I say we're all winners." Ralsei put his hands together and turned to Lancer. "And thank you, Lancer, for letting us use your facilities!"

Lancer grinned widely, his tongue falling out again. If the goober had any visible eyes they would surely be shining brightly. "Any time!! Sharing things like this makes me happy. Susie even already thanked me for it already!"

A light blush formed on Ralsei's face, close to the color of his scarf. "Well, no harm in hearing it again at least, right?" he chuckled, thumbing the edge of his shirt in mild embarrassment.

Susie felt her own cheeks begin to turn red at Lancer's always-earnest gratitude.

Before she could get too embarrassed, however, another sudden noise arose — a loud growl that everyone soon realized came from Lancer's stomach. The room briefly fell silent, but just as quickly erupted into uproarious laughter. Ralsei spoke up as the laughter faded. "I guess we've been talking for too long, huh? I say we dig in! It's only fair since we all worked so hard."

Not a single disagreement was heard. In a flash, muffins, cake, salsa, and even moss were all being devoured with reckless abandon, a well-earned reward for a day of hard work. Amidst the confectionary flurry, Susie found herself smiling. Turning this sort of thing into a competition was a silly idea in hindsight. Watching everyone enjoy her muffins, and getting to eat food that the others made... Just making and sharing something together.

Ralsei was right. Everyone was a winner today. Even Rouxls Kaard in his own, melodramatic way.

Gift Buster

terrycko

Kris was minding their own business when purple claws slammed down on the table in front of them. "We need to get Lancer a gift!" Susie roared.

Chewing their sandwich, Kris looked up and stared at her.

"And, like, Ralsei too, I guess," Susie added. "But I'm more interested in getting something for Lancer. You think they have DVD players in the Dark World?"

Kris glanced around the cafeteria. Susie had attracted attention with the noise she made, and now the other schoolkids were whispering to each other and glancing at them. Kris locked eyes with Noelle for one brief instance before their classmate averted her gaze.

Susie looked around, too. "Aw crap. I'll catch you after school, Kris!"

She bolted out of the cafeteria, nearly running into a group of kindergarteners. Kris watched her go, then refocused their attention on their sandwich.

After their last class, Susie grabbed Kris and lifted them over her head, laughing maniacally and once again drawing a lot of attention. Kris lay in her arms and waited for her to realize the people staring at the two of them. Once she did, she cleared her throat and put them down.

"So!" she said. "Let's go buy some gifts!"

They went to buy gifts. The department store wasn't close, but Kris called their mom and asked her to pick them up afterwards, so at least they wouldn't have to walk back. "Man," Susie said, "it's gonna be weird, being in a car with Toriel. I don't think she likes me very much. 'Least not when she was my teacher."

Kris couldn't picture Toriel not liking anyone. Except Asgore. She probably would never like Asgore.

They reached the store. Susie made a beeline for the discount movie bin, while Kris fell back and tried to think of something Ralsei would like. Maybe a plant... but would plants from the surface grow in the Dark World? Also, the store didn't sell plants.

Kris wandered off and found themselves in the books section. They ran their fingers along the spines, and found a book they thought would be a good fit for Ralsei. Tucking it under their arm, they looked up and squinted at the signs for the aisles, wondering if anyone else from the Dark World should get a gift. Seam, maybe? He was nice to them, if a bit depressing to talk to. Rouxls? Nah.

They grabbed a sticker book for Lancer and went to find Susie. Someone coughed behind them.

"Um," Noelle said when they turned around. "Sorry to bother you, Kris! Can I ask you something?"

Kris nodded.

"...in private?"

Noelle grabbed Kris' hand and dragged them to the hallway just outside the store's bathrooms. "Okay," she said. "Susie won't notice you're gone, right?"

Kris thought of Noelle murdering them and hiding their body in the clearance section, which would be entirely out of character for her. Besides, Kris would much rather be sold at full price.

Noelle took a deep breath and wrung her hands together. "Do you... like Susie?"

Kris nodded.

"I mean – do you like her? You know..." She made an incomprehensible gesture.

OH.

Kris shook their head. Noelle visibly relaxed. "Okay! Um, do you know who she likes? And not like, as a friend, but... you know..."

At this point, they were pretty sure they got the idea. Kris frowned and tapped their foot. Noelle looked at them expectantly, but Kris wasn't sure what to say. Susie didn't like most people, and hadn't shown much attraction towards anyone other than occasionally pointing out someone to Kris and asking if they "thought that girl was hot." Actually, that might mean something. Kris filed that piece of information away for future reference.

Noelle still needed an answer. Kris shrugged.

"Oh..." Noelle managed a smile. "That's fine! That just means I still don't know! That's... fine, I guess... aha, sorry for bothering you, Kris! I'll let you go back to... whatever you were doing."

Kris nodded. A thought occurred to them – Kris tucked the two books they got under their arm and gestured for Noelle to follow.

"Do you think Susie would like this?" Noelle said, holding out a shirt with a word Toriel had scolded Kris for using. "She likes swears, right? I know she says them."

Kris shrugged and thought of the chains they gave Susie in the Dark World.

"You know her best, right? Do you think –"

"Hey, Kris!"

Noelle jumped as Susie appeared out of nowhere and slapped Kris hard on the back. "You got everything?" she says. "I got a great movie for Lancer, and, like, some candy for Ralsei, I guess? You think he'd like candy? Oh, Noelle."

"Uh," Noelle said. "Hi."

Susie frowned. "What're you doing here?" she said, and Kris almost felt her guard going up. "Kris, what's she doing here?"

"Just shopping!" Noelle said quickly. "I wanted to try out some new fashion, so I asked Kris for their opinion!" She held the shirt up to herself. "How does it look, Kris?"

Kris gave her a thumbs up.

Susie nodded, and the grin reappeared on her face. "Man, you're such a dork, Noelle! Caring about fashion and stuff. Looks good, though!"

"Really?" Noelle flushed. "I – I mean – I'm a dork?"

"You sure are!" Susie laughed. "C'mon, Kris, let's pay for our stuff and get outta here."

On the way to check out, Kris picked up a gift for Noelle. Hopefully she would like it.

Susie wanted to jump in the Dark World the very next day. Kris told her to wait. "What's the point in making Lancer wait?" she said. "It's not like they celebrate any holidays there. He'll just think we waited for no reason!"

Kris' excuse was that they hadn't wrapped their gifts yet. They'd have them done by tomorrow. Susie groaned and stormed away; Kris thought she might go to the Dark World without them, but Susie was in all their classes as normal, so that must have been her way of agreeing to wait.

After school, Kris loitered around the halls until Susie left them alone, then stuffed an envelope in Noelle's locker. With that, everything was ready.

The next day, the classes seemed to drag on and fly by at the same time. Susie sat next to Kris at lunch and talked their ear off about the Awesome Movie she got for Lancer, it had So Much Blood. Kris isn't sure they like the idea of a movie with that much blood, considering that monsters didn't have blood and all that violence would be against humans. They asked Susie if it had a lot of dust, too. She snorted. "Yeah, but that's boring. Humans actually leave bodies and blood behind when they die! That's hardcore!"

Kris shrugged and ate the rest of their sandwich.

Eventually, in no time at all, Kris met Susie at the door to the supply closet.

"Finally!" Susie said. "What was the holdup? You took forever!"

Kris looked around. They told Noelle to meet them here, but she was nowhere to be seen. Was she not coming? Kris frowned and tapped their foot, gesturing for Susie to wait.

Susie did not. "Come on!" she said loudly. "I already wrapped the presents and everything! Let's go!"

Without another word, she grabbed Kris' arm and pulled them into the supply closet.

Kris dusted themselves off and shot a glare at Susie, who laughed. Her outfit here still had the chains Kris gave her the first time they were here. Guess she really did like them.

"So!" Susie said, hefting up her bag with the gifts. "I'm gonna go find Lancer. You can come with me, or you can find Ralsei or, y'know, whatever."

"Oh! Kris!"

Kris turned to see Ralsei running up to them, his hat pulled down over his head. Kris waved.

"I'm so glad to see you!" he said, his eyes sparkling. "I thought I heard you earlier, so I ran all this way – but no one was here! Welcome back, friends!"

"Hey, nerd," Susie said. "It's a holiday up on the surface, so we got you some gifts. Where's Lancer?"

"Lancer's at the castle," Ralsei said. "Um, did you want anything from me? I can bake a cake!"

"Hell yeah!" Susie said before Kris could tell him it wasn't necessary. "That'd be awesome! Let's go find Lancer and have a real celebration!"

Though the magic doors would take them directly to the castle, the nearest one was a bit of a walk. Ralsei chatted excitedly with Kris about the cake he was going to make, while Susie talked loudly about how Lancer was gonna love his gifts. "I bet you'll love yours, too, Ralsei!" she added.

"But man, Lancer's really gonna love his!"

"I'm glad you and Lancer are friends, Susie!" said Ralsei.

"What're you talking about?" Susie laughed and gave Ralsei a hard pat on the shoulder.
"We're friends, too, aren't we?"

Ralsei stumbled forward. "Y – yeah!" he said. "We're all friends! You, me, Kris, and Lancer!"
Kris stopped walking and held up their hand to stop Susie and Ralsei, too. "What's going on?"
Ralsei asked with a tilt of his head. "Is everything alright?"

They pointed up ahead, where a shadow crouched behind a wall.

"Huh," Susie said. "Maybe it's Lancer? I'm gonna go freak him out."

"Uh –"

Susie ran off before Ralsei could object.

"Okay," Ralsei said. "Well, if it is Lancer, he probably won't mind."

Kris nodded in agreement.

"But if it isn't... Susie could really scare them! C'mon, Kris!"

With the head start Susie had, Kris and Ralsei didn't reach her before she started screaming.

Another scream joined hers, and it took a few moments before everyone got to the same place and Kris took stock of the situation.

"Oh," Ralsei said. "Kris, who is this?"

"Kris?!" Noelle yelped. The Dark World had given her a new outfit, too, with a fluffy red robe and a large bow tied around her antlers. There was a large brown sack beside her, with wrapping paper colors peeking out from the opening. "Susie?! What's going on?"

"Why are you here?" Susie said loudly. "This is supposed to be a secret!"

The words spilled out of Noelle's mouth at a rapid pace. "I don't know! Kris told me to meet them outside the supply closet, and I got there early, and I had all these presents to give people and I thought I'd hide them inside the supply closet, except it was really dark and then I fell and I ended up here and –"

She stopped to breathe. Susie leveled an accusing glare at Kris.

"Why'd you tell Noelle about this?" she demanded.

Kris rolled their eyes. They hadn't told Noelle about the Dark World, they had just asked her to meet them and Susie at the supply closet. Noelle had no idea where she was after all – how could Kris have told her?

Ralsei cleared his throat. "Well, you're here now!" he said to Noelle. "Welcome to the Dark World! My name's Ralsei, and we're about to go see Lancer. You're Kris and Susie's friend, so we can be friends, too!"

Noelle took a deep breath and got to her feet. "It's nice to meet you, Ralsei," she said. "Sorry for, uh... freaking out. Is it really okay that I'm here?"

Ralsei nodded. "Of course!" he said. "We're going to visit our friend Lancer and exchange gifts. You can come with us!"

Kris motioned at Noelle's sack of gifts. "Oh," Noelle said. "Okay! I have gifts for Susie and Kris, here. Not for anyone else, though, I hope no one's disappointed."

Susie perked up. "Gifts? For me?"

Noelle managed a shaky smile. "Yeah! I got gifts for all my classmates! Except for Berdly. And Jockington. And Snowy. And Temmie. And, uh, anyone else who isn't you or Kris."

"Then what're we waiting for?" Susie charged down the path. "Come on!"

Upon arriving at the castle gates, Lancer launched himself into Susie's chest like a cannonball, doing nineteen points of damage. Susie cackled and pried him off, tucking him under her arm. "Hey, buddy! Missed me much?"

"Nah," Lancer said with a grin. "I'm too tough for that! What'cha got there!"

He made a grab for the gift bag. Susie dropped him and held it up over her head. "Not yet!" she said. "We've gotta make it an event!"

"Make what an event?" Lancer's eyes fell on Noelle. "Hey, who's that? She's got stuff, too!" "I'm Noelle," she said with a smile. "It's nice to meet you, Lancer."

"Whoa! How'd you know my name!"

"We told her we were going to visit you," Ralsei explained. "She probably –"

"Okay," Lancer interrupted. "C'mon! Let's go inside!"

Kris recognized Rouxls Kaard as Lancer and Susie run past him, nearly knocking him over. "Foolish child!" he said in his probably-faked accent. "And thoust brought thour worm friends with thou!"

"Hi, Rouxls!" Ralsei said. "How are you doing?"
"

Rouxls snorted. "Thou guys have no idea mine troubles! I spendeth all day cooking Lancer's favoritest foods, make sure he eats his vegetables, read him stories, listen to his horrible music... and what do I get for it?"

He paused, presumably for dramatic emphasis. Kris, Ralsei, and Noelle politely waited for him to continue.

"A wonderful little boy whom I cherish and love... who stilleth calls me Lesser Dad!"

"Oh," Ralsei said, while Kris smirked. "That's too bad. I'm sure one day he'll –"

"I deserveth to be the Greater Dad!"

"Okay," Ralsei said. "Uh. Bye."

They settled in Lancer's messy room, with toys, crayons, and miscellany strewed all over the floor. Lancer and Susie were sitting on the bed while Lancer ripped the wrapping paper off his present. "You guys were way too slow," Susie said. "I'm not making Lancer wait longer than he's gotta!"

"Oh, cool!" Lancer said. "It's a movie! What's it about?"

"Blood," said Susie. "And, like, horror and stuff. It'll be great for a tough guy like you!"

"Awesome! Thanks, Susie! I'll be sure to watch it with all the lights on! And a blanket. And ice cream. And someone to hold my hand in case it gets too scary."

"Uh."

Kris took the present they got for Lancer out of Susie's gift bag and handed it over. Lancer ripped the wrapping off with such enthusiasm, he nearly tore the cover off. "Stickers! Thank you, Kris!"

Susie grumbled. "Yeah, well, my present was better."

Lancer slapped a smiley sticker on her face. "Do I get anything else?" he asked.

Noelle laughed nervously and put her own sack down. "I, uh, only got Kris and Susie presents," she said. "Kris, why don't you open yours?"

Kris took the package and carefully unwrapped it. Inside was a kit on how to do basic electrical wiring.

"Before you were, um, friends with Susie, you played a lot of pranks," Noelle said. "I thought, um – this would make your pranks... cooler? But you don't really do them anymore, so..."

"Hey, that's still a cool gift!" Susie said. "I'd offer to take it if they don't want it, but I'm no good at the smart person stuff like you and Kris."

Noelle flushed. "You – you think I'm smart?"

Kris was honestly more surprised she thought they were smart. Well, it was a good gift. They'd find use out of it.

"Susie, there's still more gifts in your bag," Ralsei said. "Um, are there any for me?"
"Yeah, nerd." Susie took two more gifts out of the bag. "One from me and one from Kris. Here's mine!"

She chucked the bundle at him, hitting him in the chest. Ralsei picked it up off the floor and examined it. "It sounds like there's a lot of little things inside... oh no! Did you get me something glass, and it broke?"

"What? No, dude, just open it!"

Ralsei's eyes twinkled as he stared at the multicolored candy pieces. "Oh! Candy! Thanks, Susie!"

"Great! It was in the clearance section, so it barely cost me anything!" Susie paused. "Might be a little stale, though. Now, Kris' gift –"

Kris took it from her before she could throw it and handed it to Ralsei.

After unwrapping it, Ralsei squinted at the title. "Cake... failures?"

Kris opened the book and pointed out the pictures of what the cakes were supposed to look like alongside the "failed" replicas. Ralsei giggled at some of the elaborate disasters. "I love it, Kris!" he said. "Thank you!"

Susie dumped out the rest of the bag. "Okay, now here's my gift to Kris, Kris' gift to – Noelle? Man, how did I not notice you were bringing this? Oh, and Kris' gift to me."

She opened her gift immediately. Kris took the other two gifts, handed Noelle hers, and opened their own.

"Holy –" Susie cut herself off and held up the shirt. "Is this real chainmail?!"

Kris shook their head. The shirt was made from soda can tabs, cut and snapped together. It took a long time, and a lot of soda, and a lot of bathroom breaks, but –

"You made this yourself?! Whoa!" She pulled it over her head. "Okay, Lancer, hit me!"

Lancer slugged her. "Did you feel that?!"

"Hell yeah, but my defense went up!" Susie laughed. "Thanks, Kris! What'd you think of mine?"
Kris examined their gift. It was a Hot Topic gift card.

"I know gift cards kinda suck, but you told me once that your mom never lets you go into that store. Now she's gotta!" Susie grinned. "Right? Right?"

Definitely, Kris thought. Now they could buy all the edgy anime t-shirts they wanted.

Noelle opened her gift. "Oh, wow!" she said. "It's a coloring book! One of the nice ones, for adults!"

Kris nodded. Noelle had always seemed like a... colorful person. So they got her a coloring book.

She smiled at them. "Thank you, Kris!"

"Okay," Susie said. "If that's all the gifts –"

"Um..." Noelle's smile vanished, and her voice rose to a squeak. "I have a gift for you, Susie!"

"What?" Susie said. "Really?"

Noelle thrust the gift towards her. "Here you go!"

Susie looked at the package, shrugged, and ripped off the paper, revealing the clear box of colorful circles. "Oh, sweet!" she said. "Cookies!"

Noelle swallowed hard. "Actually, uh –"

Susie was already opening the box and crunching down hard on one of them. "Huh!" she said through a mouthful. "They're tough, but pretty good! What'd you put in them?"

"They're... they're chalk, Susie."

Susie blinked. For a long moment, no one said anything. Kris hesitated.

"Even better!" Susie exclaimed. "How'd you know I like this stuff?"

Noelle's face turned red. "Um, I think the whole school knows you eat chalk, Susie. I think... it's... a cool... quirk?"

Susie burst out laughing and threw an arm around Noelle, who yelped. "It's perfect! Thanks, dork!"

Kris smiled. Looks like their plan worked, after all.

Ralsei looked through the book Kris got him, found the funniest cake failure, and baked one that looked just like it. Somehow, that Ralsei was able to make a perfect replica of a failed replica made it even funnier. Susie snorted cake out her nose, which she assured everyone was very painful, but hilarious.

"Thanks for inviting me, Kris," Noelle said while they ate. "This is... really special!"

"Don't tell anyone else," Susie said. "Can you imagine if the whole school knew about this? Can you imagine Berdly down here?" She frowned. "Actually, if Berdly was here, Lancer could thrash him. I changed my mind, you can tell Berdly."

"Don't worry, I'm not telling anyone," Noelle said. "It's just nice to be here."

"You can come back, if you want!" Ralsei said. "Any friend of Susie and Kris is welcome!"

"R – right!" Noelle squeaked. "I'm – I'm Susie's friend!"

"After that awesome gift?" Susie grinned. "You sure are! Wanna break into school over winter break with me?"

"Eh?! I mean – of course!"

Kris looked around at the people around them – Susie laughing at Noelle's flustered face, Rouxls putting a plate of vegetables in front of a complaining Lancer, Ralsei looking back at them and smiling under his hat – and wondered how they had gotten so lucky. They used to be just the weird kid at school – and then Ralsei had told them they were a hero of light.

Hero or not, Kris was just glad they had these friends.

Not-So-Empty Town

Turbomun

Kris told their mother that they were sleeping over at Susie's house. Susie told her parents that she was sleeping over at Kris's house. Toting their duffle bags, they hurried through the dusk, down the streets of Hometown, and finally met just in front of the school.

"Oh man," muttered Susie, her toothy grin flashing even in the low light. "This is gonna be awesome. Kris, please tell me that you got the keys. I've been looking forward to this all day..."

Kris reached into their duffel bag, shoving their hand down past the pajamas and socks and clothes for tomorrow, and pulled out the master key to the school – their mother's spare.

"Oh man," repeated Susie, her grin stretching across her whole face now. "I knew you had it in you, Kris! You must've felt like a real badass snatching that from your mom, huh?"

Kris shrugged. Yeah, technically they'd stolen the key, but it wasn't like they were going to steal or break anything inside the school. They were just here to do exactly what they had told their mom that they'd be doing: having a slumber party with Susie.

It just so happened that a couple of other, unmentioned friends would be joining them...

...

Being in the school when it was vacant didn't even feel weird anymore. They'd done it so many times that the silent halls now felt more peaceful than foreboding. As for the dark closet, and the tumble down into the cliffs, that was all like a roller coaster ride – if anything, it was like the beginning of the coaster, where your car was creeping up the track and you felt anticipation, cold and prickly, fluttering at the base of your throat. It was the prelude to an adventure, the time when you knew that the best was still to come.

"Race you to town, Kris!" called Susie as soon as they'd both hit the ground.

They both took off running. Susie was faster, but Kris had better stamina – Noelle had been prodding at them to join the track team – and the end result was that the two of them were almost evenly matched. Susie would pull ahead, fall behind, then pull ahead again, skidding down the frozen waterfall formations while whooping and cheering into the world around her. None of the creatures in this place gave it a second thought.

As they approached Ralsei's castle, Lancer started running to meet them, but didn't get very far before Susie skidded to a halt before him. "Hoho!" he declared. "The clowns finally arrive! What took you so long?!"

"Something about having to sneak past our parents 'cause they wouldn't like the idea of us hanging out in an empty school all night." She folded him into a headlock and gave him a noogie; his tongue flopped out of his mouth happily. "But now we're here—"

"And the first official Fun Gang sleepover can begin!" He wriggled his way out of her grasp. "C'mon! Let's go tell each other secrets!"

"You're getting way ahead of yourself!" called Susie as he took off again.

The three of them reached the door, and then Ralsei was there, ushering them into the castle – no voluminous cloak this time, just his regular robe with his hat tipped up to reveal a little of his face – and as the heavy doors clunked shut behind them, Kris took a deep breath. More than they had since their brother took off for college, they had a strong, sincere feeling of coming home.

...

Fifteen minutes later, Kris and Susie had changed into their pajamas, at Lancer's request; he insisted that it wasn't a slumber party if they weren't "ready to slumber." Susie had an oversized T-shirt and ragged lounge pants; Kris was wearing one of the cutesy button-down PJ suits that their mother tended to buy for them; and Lancer himself had a blue fleece onesie, covered in a repeating motif of spades.

The castle looked, mostly, just like Kris had imagined it would. Archways and high ceilings; elaborate decorative carvings peering from the stone walls like ghostly faces behind a veil; stained-glass windows inlaid with the Delta Rune itself. And since Ralsei lived here, the elegant furniture was free of dust and neatly arranged, with lamps adding a cozy yellow glow to each room.

"Nice place you got here," commented Susie, flopping out on Ralsei's bed like she owned the place. "Mind if I move in? It's way better than the frickin' trailer where I live."

Ralsei looked at her out of the corner of his glasses, settling two bowls of snacks in the middle of the floor. "But Susie, wouldn't your family start to worry about you?"

She snorted. "I guess."

When she declined to elaborate, Ralsei straightened up, evidently deciding that asking her for details didn't suit the mood of their sleepover. "O-okay, everybody! I've designed an itinerary to give us the most optimal slumber party experience possible!" He reached into the pocket of his robe and withdrew a neatly written checklist. "We've already changed into our pajamas, so...that's step one, check. Now it's eight o'clock, which means it's time to eat snacks while giggling excessively. At eight forty-five, we go downstairs and you can help me bake a cake! At nine-fifteen, pre-bed tea. And then a pillow fight at ten—"

Lancer perked up as if someone had jabbed him with a pin. "Pillow fight!" He reached across Susie and snatched up the closest pillow, which happened to be a throw cushion with decorative embroidery that Ralsei had probably done himself. "Now that's what I'm talkin' about!"

"The pillow fight will be at ten o'clock," explained Ralsei. "It's not—"

He was cut off by Lancer flinging the pillow directly at him; it struck him squarely in the face, nearly knocking off his glasses. Susie howled with laughter.

"Pil-low fight! Pil-low fight!" chanted Lancer, pumping his fists rhythmically in the air.

"I'll give you a pillow to fight, you little brat splat!" declared Susie, still laughing. She grabbed the pillow that Ralsei presumably slept on each night and started whomping Lancer with it, throttling herself so that the blows caused more annoyance than pain. And even then, Lancer was apparently too delighted to be annoyed, because he immediately started laughing and running around, giving her a moving target to focus on.

Eventually, Lancer hopped off of the bed and darted behind Kris; Susie wasn't dissuaded. "In that case, I'll just wail on both of you!" she growled, teeth flashing in mock-threat, and suddenly Kris was struggling not to laugh as Susie drove them down on their knees with the power of expertly aimed pillow-strikes. Not one to be dissuaded, they stretched out and just managed to grab hold of the throw cushion that had hit Ralsei, flinging it at Susie for a surprise attack.

"Ooooooh!" shouted Lancer dramatically, jumping up and down. "That's one point for Team Blue Person!"

"Are you switching sides, you little traitor?!" Susie bellowed, and refocused her efforts on him – this time discarding the pillow and just flat-out picking him up. She held him upside-down, shaking him lightly and pretending to snarl, and his laughter rang deafeningly around the bedroom.

Ralsei watched all of this with a slightly defeated look on his face, resetting his glasses on his snout. "I-I guess we can check off the pillow fight now..."

Kris frowned at his tone.

However, once Susie had dropped Lancer and the two of them set to work gobbling up the snacks, Ralsei seemed to come back to himself a bit. Kris noticed, as they snuck a few handfuls here and there, that he never even attempted to eat anything; he never even tried to grab something. Oh, well, maybe he'd had dinner before they came over.

When the bowls were nearly empty, he timidly spoke up. "So...how about that cake...?"

"Hang on, Dr. Toothpaste!" exclaimed Lancer, jabbing a finger in Ralsei's direction. "You haven't changed into your pajamas yet!"

Ralsei leaned back a little, as if he were afraid that the finger was about to start spewing bullets at him. "I-it's not time for bed yet, though. I can change later—"

"Pa-ja-mas! Pa-ja-mas!" Once again, Lancer began to chant, and once again Susie joined in. But when Ralsei shrank down, looking completely lost and intimidated, Kris found himself caught between confusion and concern. On the one hand, something was

obviously making him uncomfortable; on the other, all he was being asked was to put on his pajamas. What was so demanding about that? It wasn't like he had to change in front of his friends or anything...

"Okay, enough!" he finally shouted over the din, in a high, tremulous voice.

Lancer's tongue poked out eagerly. "You'll put on your pajamas now?!"

"I-I...I can't." Ralsei dragged his hat down, concealing most of his face. From behind the brim came his muffled, embarrassed confession: "I don't have any pajamas."

Susie snorted derisively, then either didn't acknowledge or didn't notice the look that Kris shot in her direction. "Wait, seriously? Then what do you sleep in?"

"Just my normal clothes," mumbled Ralsei. "Except I take off my glasses so they don't get ruined. And my hat too, usually."

Lancer tilted his head thoughtfully. "Oh. Then...take them off!"

While Susie practically wheezed with laughter at the accidental innuendo, he pounced on Ralsei, snatching off his glasses with one hand and his wide-brimmed hat with the other. Ralsei reared back with a squeak that made Kris struggle to hold back their giggles.

"There!" proclaimed Lancer. "Now you look nice and cozy!"

Ralsei blinked owlishly, pale and vulnerable in the absence of his hat's ever-present shadow. "Hang on! I-I need my glasses if we're going to make that cake! Otherwise I won't be able to see the ingredients properly!"

"Oh, yeah." After a second, Lancer passed back the glasses, then started to chant for the third time that night: "Cake! Cake! Cake!"

Ralsei stifled a sigh, but a tiny smile was working its way across his uncovered mouth. His guests were interested once again in the itinerary he'd drawn up, so everything was all right...for now.

...

Kris didn't say anything, but they rather suspected that having Susie and Lancer in a kitchen environment was not going to work out particularly neatly, and it took all of five minutes for this theory to be vindicated.

Everything was okay at first. Ralsei lined up the ingredients for red velvet cake on the counter, eggs and milk and flour and so on all arranged in an orderly row, and he started to explain his recipe to his friends. He broke the eggs himself (smart move on his part, Kris thought) and measured out all the ingredients. Then:

"I want to mix!" Lancer piped up.

Ralsei smiled at once, albeit in a slightly strained way, like an admonished pupil striving for some semblance of approval. "Okay, sure! Here, just take this whisk..."

Lancer began to spin the batter in slow, clumsy circles. Susie was not impressed. "It's never gonna get mixed if you go that slowly. Put your back into it!"

"Oh...like this?" He twirled the whisk slightly faster.

"No, like this!" She snatched the bowl and whisk away from him, stirring so rapidly that her arm became a pinkish-mauve motion smear. He clapped appreciatively, clearly more enthusiastic about this lesson than he'd been about Ralsei's.

Ralsei, on the other hand, looked slightly alarmed. "Um, Susie, I think that's too—"

"Don't tell me how to live my life!" she bellowed, somehow stirring faster still.

At that point, the centrifugal force became too great, and the batter began spraying in long arcs around the kitchen. Kris scrambled back; Ralsei did too, but not quickly enough, and he got splattered in the bare face. Lancer, on the other hand, was delighted to remain in the splash zone, opening his mouth to catch flecks of batter like snowflakes.

Finally, Susie dropped the whisk into the empty bowl, declaring: "Now that's how you mix!"

Lancer laughed, seemingly not noticing that all of the batter had been wasted. "It looks like blood!"

"Yeah – thick, sugary blood!" agreed Susie. She leaned down and swiped her tongue across Lancer's cheek, and he burst into giggles.

Ralsei, who appeared to be going through the five stages of grief over his ruined cake, suddenly winced. "Ew! That's – really not sanitary in the kitchen...!"

But of course, the other two didn't listen to him. Soon they were running wild, trying to wipe batter on each other's clothes, or trying to splatter the mess even further. Lancer chased Susie around the whole kitchen, screaming that he wanted to lick her, too, all the while leaving a trail of red-velvet footprints in his wake.

Kris watched them for a while, bemused...and then they stiffened. "Guys!" they hissed. Susie trundled to a halt. "What is it?"

Kris pointed at the kitchen door – which was now dangling open. Ralsei had just run out.

...

They found him a few floors up, on a terrace that overlooked the kingdom...if you could classify a few vacant houses and shops as such. From up here, everything was so dark that it was difficult to tell that the shapes across the ground formed a town. The only lights came from the windows of the castle itself, twinkling softly.

Kris approached him, almost close enough to brush against him, but not quite. "Hey."

He didn't say anything.

They cleared their throat, continuing awkwardly. "Sorry about...your kitchen."

After a moment, Ralsei uttered a sigh, so low and sad that it made their heart twinge. "I'm not upset about the kitchen," he murmured. "Well...okay, I'm a little upset about the kitchen, but mostly I'm upset because...I messed up."

"You messed up?" echoed Kris, arching their brow.

He bobbed his head shamefacedly. "I really thought that my itinerary would be a good idea. We could fit all of the classic sleepover activities into our schedule tonight – but I should have known that Susie and Lancer weren't going to be interested. I just wanted everyone to have fun. I wanted this night to be special..."

"But we are having fun," interjected a voice behind them – Susie, peering perplexedly from behind her bangs. "I can't remember the last time I was so excited to go to sleep at somebody else's house!"

"And I think tonight is special," added Lancer, peeking from behind her, his tongue flopping out of his mouth.

Kris nodded. "I agree."

Ralsei barely looked comforted. "I should have known better. But...I've never had a slumber party before..."

"Hey, me neither," said Susie.

"Me neither!" chirped Lancer. "My dad would've never let me!"

"I haven't had a slumber party before, either," Kris said. Unless you counted sharing a room with their brother, and they didn't. That wasn't a slumber party, it was just...life.

"Really?" Ralsei blinked. "But...you guys all seemed so sure of yourselves!"

Susie shrugged. "We're just making it up as we go along. We weren't smart enough to do a whole schedule...we'd need a toothpaste doctorate for that."

That made everybody giggle, and the giggling made the tension ebb away, vanishing like curls of mist into the darkness above the castle. Smiling, Kris placed their hand on Ralsei's shoulder. "It doesn't matter that you don't have pajamas or that you like to schedule things," they told him. "The most important part of a slumber party is hanging out with friends. And you're the best at that."

He beamed at them, too delighted to speak.

"Can we make the cake now?" asked Lancer. "For real? I promise I won't let Susie lick me this time!"

"And I won't stir so hard," Susie added.

"And I'll help you clean up the kitchen," offered Kris.

"Of course!" exclaimed Ralsei. "I'll show you how to make the best red velvet cake...oh, I mean, the best sugary blood cake!"

And as the four of them headed back down the stairs, their peals of laughter danced off of the balcony and into the night, filling up the entire empty town.

Our Quite Flame

vaultboii

Inevitably, Ralsei was the first one to notice Kris lagging behind.

The camping trip had been a nice idea, yeah. The sound of hiking through Scarlet Forest made it a bit of a challenge to say yes to, yet still friendly enough that Kris didn't immediately say no when Ralsei brought it up. Then Lancer had invited himself, and that meant Susie was coming along, and by that time Kris' vote was one to four. But, hey. Kris couldn't complain, even if the two bundles of mischief had dragged themselves along. It was *camping*. And Kris prided themselves on never missing a single day of camp.

And they were not tired, thank you very much. Sure, maybe their sword was dragging behind them and every second step was a stumble, but they were hardly exhausted. Just a wee bit drowsy from the previous night. Maybe a little weary from keeping up to Susie and Lancer's pace. Kris could hardly call it tired.

(perhaps they had only gotten two hours of sleep. Hardly the point.)

But alas, the weariness was scanned furiously by Ralsei's caring gaze. The next stumble did not go unnoticed. Nor did the next, or when Kris kicked a pebble against a tree by accident and the rock ricocheted off their armour. Ralsei looked on as they staggered forward again and halted. "Are you okay?" The little Shadow Prince asked.

Kris heaved the sword upright and did not look in the Shadow Prince's eyes.

Which was as good as telling him Kris was close to passing out on the next step. "You're tired!" Ralsei exclaimed. Half a field away, Lancer and Susie's heads snapped up in recognition of weakness. "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were just having trouble walking, I didn't notice you were tired! I suppose you have been walking for a while --"

Kris waved the help away with one hand. "I'm fine," they insisted.

By that time Susie and Lancer had lingered closer. The two troublemakers cackled once, and, with a flourish unmatched by the grace of a ballerina, Lancer scrambled forward to poke at Kris. "Aw, you look exhausted!" The little Spade sang. "Did our evil tricks before tire you out?"

Susie paused. The axe rested on the ground and the taller warrior bent down. "Huh," she said. "Say, you do look like sh -"

"Hey, uncalled for," Ralsei protested. Then, with gentleness matched only by Toriel, he looked to Kris. "You do look tired," he said.

Which irked Kris. Granted, a lot of things tended to settle under their skin easily, but being the subject of three piercing gazes was unnerving. They could feel their temper already shunting straight to annoyance, something that would quickly lead to their growing

irritation. Irritation gave them headaches. Kris could not handle staggering along with a pounding pulse beating drums in their mind.

Calm down, something chanted quietly. Peacefully. Think peacefully.

Reluctantly, Kris shrugged off the stares. "Not tired," they lied.

"Hogwash," Lancer said with conviction as Susie dropped another word that Kris had heard their mother say once when she had smashed a plate. "Hey, watch the tier swears!"

"Not tired," they insisted again, sending a glare at all three of them. Susie didn't bother looking, and Lancer's smile fell a few watts lower. Of the three, Ralsei was the only one who matched their stubborn look, with a stare that reeked of concern. It reminded them so much of another glare that they had to look away. They set their eyes to the treeline. "Let's go."

"Alright, pipsqueak, but don't slow us down," Susie said. The group moved forward.

Kris took one step, and that's when their legs had enough.

They crashed. Hard. Armour hit ground, and their sword's blade sunk deep into soil as they hit the ground with a huff and took a knee. It was the equivalent of a somersault in full-armour. The world revolved, round and round. When it finally stopped spinning was when they decided to completely pass out.

For a few seconds. They came awake to the laughter of two absolute imbeciles, and the near-shrieks of one half-hysterical fluffy boy. "Guys, *stop laughing* and help me get Kris under this tree," Ralsei's voice pleaded somewhere from their right, and that's when strong hands hoisted Kris up and led them weakly to their feet. Purple swayed to and fro in their vision. It was still laughing. "Kris! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Kris called out. They probably weren't. "Tree root."

"Why are you so *tired*?" Susie's voice snorted from the blur of purple, and her hands fell from supporting them. Kris felt their legs wobble. "All-nighter? You look like the nerd who spends all night reading *fiction*."

"Not tired," they gritted out again, and then promptly fell over again. Yippee.

Susie laughed hard. Ralsei, too concerned to even formulate a sentence now, ducked down and lifted their arm around his shoulder. "Let's set camp," the prince insisted quickly. "Make a fire. Let Kris sleep."

"I'm not --"

"Dude." Susie squatted down by their useless attempts to get up, and laughed again. It held no mirth, only wicked glee. "Dude, you're falling asleep right here and now. Conk out before you trip down a cliff. Or another Pon. Man, you should've seen the way you face-planted."

Lancer had spent this entire time loudly cackling, but now he squatted down just like Susie and stuck his tongue out again. "Let's do the 'camping' now, then! Kris can rest and we

can burn logs 'n roast Dark Candy. It'll be like, Fun Gang time 2.0!" A shift, and then the little Spade glanced around widely, brimmed with excitement. "Where's your axe? There was a plain of trees back there!"

Blue glinted as the axe unsheathed, and Susie grinned down at Lancer with too many teeth. "Let's go, pal," she snarled and then the two were off, running back the way they came with wicked laughter following them.

Oh, *boy*. They had to help. Kris struggled to get back up. "Susie, Lancer --"

And Ralsei was there. Two soft hands rested on their shoulder-pads, worried. "No," the Prince said softly. "You stay here and nap. We'll set up a campfire, and I'll uh, I'll make sure they don't cause too much trouble. No offense, but you might set yourself on fire at this rate." One more pat, and then Ralsei stood up. "Sleep. I'll wake you up when we're done, ok?"

And then the fluffy friend was running off after Susie and Lancer. "Only dead trees!"

The tree was too comfy against their back. Ah, they must be really tired then to be calling trees comfy. In the fading of noise Kris heard a few loud cheers, and then the splitting of wood. Susie was cutting firewood. Hm. Better than guards, they supposed.

The world dulled at the edges.

Kris closed their eyes, and was sucked away by sleep.

▲

When they opened their eyes, the glade was unrecognizable.

Only because of the darkness, of course. Kris understood as soon as they opened their eyes why the people of this world called themselves Darkners. Vibrant, inky black had shrouded the forest in mystery, barely letting Kris see the edges of Susie nearby. Gone was the hue of scarlet from the trees. Gone was the brightness overhead. The entire Scarlet Forest had plunged into an abyss of black.

Which certainly shrouded Ralsei well enough. Enough that when a friendly hand fell on their shoulder Kris shot up as if tasered, and flung their entire weight at the poor prince. "Wait!" came the cry but it was too late, and Ralsei found himself under the crunch of metal.

Twin cackles erupted. *Lancer's cackle could work as an alarm*, Kris thought tiredly.

"Ow."

"Sorry."

Armour peeled itself off the prince. Kris staggered upwards, and almost fell backwards, but they maintained on their feet. Praise to small miracles. Looking down at the sprawled Ralsei, they winced and offered a hand up. The Prince accepted; and like that, they were both upright and rubbing away at consequential bruises.

Susie interrupted the entire scene with a snort. "So the Sleeping Beauty awakes," she said, and Kris turned to only see the light of her blue axe gleaming in the darkness. "Five hours. *Nice.*"

"Susie thought you died," Lancer chirped in.

"No, I did not." The axe turned away, and Kris was left in the grip of night. "I thought Kris sleeps weird. Do you ever move when you sleep?"

"I don't think a person can answer how they sleep, Suz."

"We were about to light the fire," Ralsei interrupted, and Kris was grateful to hear his voice. Sanity was restored to the world. "Then Lancer yelled about how you were moving and we decided to hold it off to wake you. I guess that was a mistake?" There was a pause. "I'll uh, announce next time I put my hand on your shoulder."

Kris gave him a gracious nod.

Lancer's blue bounced closer. "Well now since sleepyhead is awake, light the fire," and a swish of air must've meant that the small one had gestured towards the unlit campfire, but Kris could not see a thing in the black night. "Come-on, Ralsei."

An inhale of air came from Ralsei's direction. "I'm not lighting it," the healer hissed slowly.

"Pipsqueak, we were over this. It's a *small* fire --"

"It's a large fire! Huge! You guys added too much wood!"

A barking laugh that sounded a lot like Susie came from behind Kris. "You wanted a fire," the monster smugly said, and a clang filled the glade. Another chunk of something (hopefully wood) found its way on a pile. "You got a fire."

"I wanted a *small* fire." Ralsei pleaded. "Not something that could burn this entire forest down! Are you sure the hole in the ground is deep enough to hold the flame?"

Kris decided the best way to deal with this was to roll with it. Pattering closer, their eyes finally noticed Lancer, stained in dirt and grit, but beaming wider than the human had ever seen him before. "I dug the hole all by *myself*," the Spade announced loudly. "It's fine. Perfect. *Beautiful.*"

"Damn right it is."

"Hoo boy," Ralsei puffed out a huff and adjusted nervously. "Okay. *Okay.* But I'm not answering to the King if we burn down Scarlet Forest."

"We won't."

"Maybe."

Kris said nothing, and awaited the inevitable explosion to occur.

Ralsei lived up to his skill, however. The fire did not burst; a small spark licked the edge of a pit and flared up to the first log. Green swayed back and forth tasting the tip of wood before it caught, and with a vibrant hum, colour shot up into the sky illuminating the sway of trees around them. The glow caught each shine of red leaves, turning the sky crimson and swirling.

"Dayum," Susie admired.

Kris had to agree. The campfires with their family hadn't been this bright or friendly, just embers of red flame that struggled to ignite under Asgore's hands until Toriel helped. Yet, as they stared at the blazing green flames, a trickle of homesickness rose in their stomach all the same. They gave Ralsei a small thumbs-up (it was impressive) and slowly slunk to a sit. Lancer flopped down beside them, and Ralsei joined them after checking that the glade wouldn't burn down around them. The group huddled together, and enjoyed the new warmth.

Except Susie was left standing alone. The monster looked at their snugness, and made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat. "Oh, yes, all cozy and nice on the ground," she mumbled. "Just *reeking* of warmth down here, ain't it."

"Come closer to the fire then," Ralsei insisted. "I brought blankets for a reason."

"And closer to you losers? I don't think so."

That got the little one's attention. "Am I a loser?" Lancer asked quietly, still as bright but with hesitation embedded in the tone. He was eyeing the fire as if it would leap out and nip at him. With a hum of understanding, Ralsei scooted closer and smiled friendly at the wary Spade. An orange blanket found its way to drape over him.

There was a pause. Susie moved closer and sat down, close enough to flick Lancer on the nose. "Nah," she said. "You're *cool*."

Lancer beamed.

There were no more words to be said after. Green danced up to the red whirlpool of leaves overhead, and the cool night sky shone down. In the crinkle of rocking branches Lancer's breathing embedded slower and slower, until all Kris felt against their knee was the murmur of sleep against their knees. They patted him once, then floundered for a pillow behind them. Asriel had told them once their knees were too bony to rest on. With armour would probably mean a stiff neck. Kris didn't need to subject Lancer to the fate of a pained morning.

They lifted his head. Susie watched, wary. "Little guy asleep?" Not waiting for a response, she leaned forward and one taloned hand poked Lancer gently. When the Darkner did not stir, a snicker escaped the monster and she leaned back. "Tuckered out. What a *nerd*. Didn't even get to see if Dark Candy tasted like s'mores if roasted."

The flames flickered. Green lit up the edges of Ralsei's face, and the Darkner, perhaps a reflex, pulled his hat down lower. "You know it'll just melt in his hands," he scolded. "He'd hurt himself."

"It'd be a good melt. Pain would be total worth. Taste like heaven."

"She's right," Kris said softly.

Both turned to look at them, eyes wide. In their gaze Kris saw fondness, and felt red streak into their ears. Thank the stars for bangs and thank the stars it was dark. However, their embarrassment was easily read, for Ralsei giggled and put a hand on Kris' shoulder.

"You quiet losers are always full of surprises," Susie scoffed. Her grin was playful.

"Good surprises," Ralsei added, still gleeful.

Kris put their hands over their ears and scowled at his betrayal.

The teasing stopped there though. The main bully found herself distracted by the sky, and with an exhale, the monster leaned back into the blankets next to the slumbering spade. Kris blinked, lowered their hands and after a brief consideration, joined her. Following her eyes they looked up to where stars usually lined the night sky, but nothing showed. The bleak black of abyss edged the treeline. Ever so often a streak of blue flared through it, a shot of colour clashing with the crimson glade.

Susie softly chuckled. "Looks nothing like home, eh? Too dark." So close to her, Kris could hear how she drew the words between crooked teeth. "You guys got no stars. Looks lonely up there. Man, you guys really are *Darkners*."

Kris shook their head. Ralsei paused next to them, and laid down. His eyes were soft. "We get our light in other ways," the prince said quietly.

"Oh, god, here comes the sap."

"Yeah you know, it's usually lonely here in the night. King never thought it was necessary to have stars. So, black it was." Ralsei blinked slowly, then continued on. "I haven't had a campfire with anyone since...well, since never I suppose. King never liked those either." The prince drew both hands together. "Always liked how they were written in books though. Campfire songs, singing, dancing," and a wishful sigh came from him. "I would like that."

"No banjos, please," Susie commented and adjusted both hands behind her head. "Asgore scarred me enough. Remember his Twinkle-Twinkle version?"

Kris unfortunately did.

"Yeah, I guess." Ralsei shrugged, and turned to Kris. "But, seriously. Thank you for being here. It's been...fun."

"God, if I knew these campfires would've been this sappy I should've run," Susie said offhandedly. Kris turned to give her a look, and found her studying the sky intently avoiding all gazes. "Eh. Should've known losers like you cry over fires. But, you know -- you're stuck with the Fun Gang until we, uh, go. Yeah."

Ralsei blinked, and rotated until he was staring at Susie. There was a small smile. Kris themselves had to raise an eyebrow at Susie. The monster found herself the centre of attention immediately, and flushed a violet beet. "Ay, piss off." She snarled and the giggles Ralsei had were too contagious for Kris to not chuckle themselves. "Oh *piss off* the both of ya, I'm going to throw both of you into the fire --"

"So much for leaving the sappy campfire, huh?"

"Oh, that's it," and Susie rolled to wrestle Kris into the blankets. A pillow came up and struck, and Kris came out coughing and cackling. "Sap *this*, you irritating little fleshbag."

"You guys are going to wake up Lancer," Ralsei hissed, half-amused, and they both froze to stare at the still slumbering spade. The little prince of the kingdom only hummed and turned in his orange blanket, not responding.

Crisis averted.

Susie released Kris from her grip and slumped back. "Watch yourself," she jeered. "Just you wait. If Lancer wasn't sleeping I'd --"

Kris only smiled and leaned back. Susie flipped them the infamous bird.

"As fun as this has been, I think I'm calling it a night." Ralsei gestured for a pillow himself, and was immediately socked by Susie's lazy throw. Feathers spread everywhere, and the fluffy boy came up with a sour look. "Ow. Thanks."

"No problemo." Susie threw a blanket towards Kris. "Aight, sleepyhead, it's nap time, night night, need a lullaby?"

"Oh, quit teasing them."

The glade settled down. Ralsei lowered the green flames, and crimson leaves turned to deep scarlet overhead. The darkness embedded closer, but this time, Kris found it friendly. Sleep danced at the corners of their vision. *Man*. Maybe they had been tired earlier. Just a bit.

"Good night, losers."

"Good night, Susie."

The three heroes slept.

